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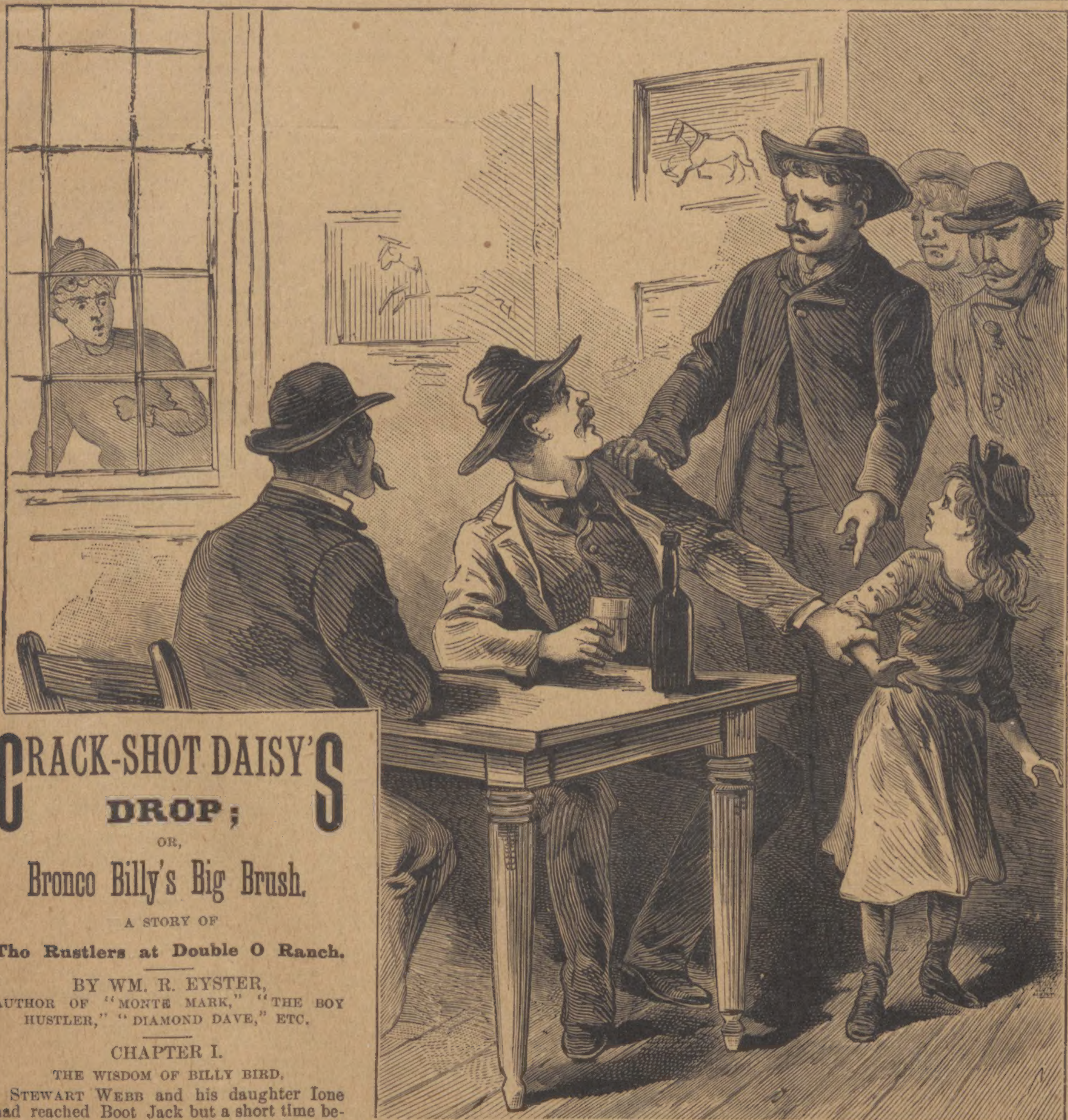
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CRACK-SHOT DAISY'S DROP;

OR,

Bronco Billy's Big Brush.

A STORY OF

The Rustlers at Double O Ranch.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "MONTE MARK," "THE BOY
HUSTLER," "DIAMOND DAVE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE WISDOM OF BILLY BIRD.

STEWART WEBB and his daughter Ione
had reached Boot Jack but a short time be-
fore, and wandering out almost at once ad-
dressed the boy incidentally.

THE HAND OF ED DALE DROPPED QUIETLY ON HIS SHOULDER. "SORRY TO TROUBLE
YOU, MY FRIEND, BUT I'LL TAKE CHARGE OF THE YOUNG LADY.

They had been listening to him gravely. "Sure ye'r right, then, go ahead," he continued.

"Ef yer ain't right, p'rhaps ther best plan are ter go ahead anyhow. It's kinder late ter throw to the middle now."

He was a boy of probably fourteen to sixteen, though his features had a shrewdness far beyond his years. His name was Billy Bird or Bronco Billy as he was often called, and he looked up at his listeners, and grinned at their perplexity.

Stewart Webb was a man, plainly dressed, whose face looked as though the weather-beaten marks on it might have been made by the storms of sixty years. It was not a weak face, though at present it wore a look of uncertainty.

Ione Webb might have been eighteen, and might have been several years older than that. Her face was fresh, bright, handsome, and she did not seem at all worried that the boy could give them no real information concerning the William Webb, for whom they inquired.

"That is your advice, is it?" she asked, with a bewitching smile.

"Oh, I ain't givin' edvisel. Don't pay, nohow. Might sell yer some fur a quarter, but I wouldn't swear it'd be w'uth ther money. I'm a or'fun, yer see, with a pore, lone widder ter s'port. Makes me hus'sel fur coin."

The girl slipped her hand in her pocket and out again. She held some silver in her fingers.

"You certainly know more about Boot Jack than we do, and your opinion might be worth more than a quarter. But to make sure of it I would like to ask a few questions."

"Ain't objectin' fur a cent. Al'lers willin' ter talk," answered the boy, glancing at the silver. "Toss it along an' you kin ask right erlong, ef it takes all mornin'."

"We are looking for one William Webb, and you have told us we will be apt to find him at the Double O Ranch."

"That war 'bout ther size ov it."

"And yet you say you know of no one answering his description."

The lad was chewing thoughtfully at a toothpick, and watching the face of the speaker in an absent way. Was he puzzled?

He spoke at last, and with the air of one who had turned over in his mind various contingencies.

"Yer see, it's this hyer way: I know ther fellers on ther other ranches, an' ther hull caboodle ez hangs 'round Boot Jack. He ain't none ov them, er my mammy's only son are dumber than a clam. An' he ain't that."

"Well?"

"Ef he's bin anywhar about he's hung up at ther Double O. Some ov the gang are in Boot Jack now, but they ain't startin' out thar till a'rter grub time. They're jest gittin' back from a drive, an' ain't a-hurryin'. But it ain't no use ter monkey 'with them. Camels couldn't drag a word outen them 'bout a pard. Got ter see ther boss. It's 'bout ten chances he'll talk."

"And as many that he will not."

"That's fur you ter say; but ef yer wants ter find Sweet William it's yer best hold."

The girl shrugged her shoulders, while the old gentleman started impatiently. He did not see much profit in the conversation.

"If we are to visit this ranch there is little time to lose. We know nothing of the country, and it is a long ways off. I understand it is largely being fenced."

"Fences won't hinder tell yer gits thar; an' ef you'll wait tell they gits goin' ther boyees'll show yer ther way."

"No, no; that will never do."

"Foller 'em out, then."

"No. We must gc before them. They are a wild, reckless set, and though they might not mean harm, yet, if they have

been having the time such men usually do after a drive, there might be an accident we would not care to see."

"Ez long ez it's daylight thar ain't a bit ov danger. They're jest lambs. When it gits night it's s'uthin' else, fur yer see, out hyer, ther gang don't allers stop ter ask who's comin' when they see a stranger peltin' along after dark. Outside ov that, one time'd be as good as another. It's moonlight, an' a clear trail."

"From what you said it seems possible we may not be received as cordially as we would like. What sort of a man is the owper of the Double O?"

"Ther kunnel? Oh, he's white from ther ground up, ef you kin believe the boys, an' they don't often make mistakes. He'll treat yer all right ef you meets him square. When a party tries ter play roots on him that are a different thing. I wouldn't like ter have him after my scalp—an' I'm not slow me-self."

"Is he married?"

The question was carelessly asked, but the boy again was slow in answering, and looking from one to the other of his listeners, studying the two faces in turn with a keenness that seemed to tell of suspicion.

"Ask me somethin' easy," he said at length.

"Thar's no tellin'. Most men of his age are, er has bin; an' thar's a likely lookin' young leddy thar thet they calls his daughter. But I never hearded nothin' 'bout ther madam. P'rhaps he's lost her. Wouldn't advise yer ter ask him afore yer gits right reasonable intimate. He hez a way ov settin' down on folks, an' he might set down on you."

"There is a lady there, at all events. I think, father, we can risk it. If this boy can show us where to hire a couple of horses we will start at once, and if he will act as our guide we will pay him well for his trouble."

"As you choose, Ione; as you choose. Remember, I never had much hope of finding the boy, and it is only a suspicion that the young man we heard of as coming in this direction might be William. Do as you choose. Of course, we will pay the guide."

"I kin find ther cayeuses, all right enough; an' I kin absorb 'bout all ther re-numerashun you kin afford ter give me," answered the boy, who seemed to think that, after all, the words were addressed to him; "but I wants ter hev a fair understandin' afore we starts. It's w'uth about a dollar ter ride out thar, an' ef we start tergether we'll git thar sure, an' so, fur that part, I wants pay in advance."

"Ez to ther gittin' back, that's su'thin' else, an' ef we make ther rifle, it's w'uth an extry five, ez you'll allow ef we are lucky enough ter hit ther turn. Ef that's a bargain, we won't waste more time chinnin', but git right down ter biz. You don't want ter say whar ye'r goin' when ye'r sets out, an' ye'r better let me dicker fur ther broncos. Lame Mike hez a pair thet will do well enough."

The suggestions of the lad were not reassuring, yet they were allowed to pass without further question. The young lady evidently had made up her mind, and was now only in haste to be off.

"Very well. It is understood that we pay you a dollar in advance, and five more when we return, with whatever seems to be a reasonable amount for horse hire. Now, waste no more time. We can never be certain until we go and find out, and the sooner it is done the better."

"Be ready in ten minutes, by ther clock, an' we better start from the Saint's Rest, ef thar is whar ye'r stoppin'. So-long!"

The Saint's Rest was the name of the nearest approach to a hotel of which Boot Jack could boast.

When the boy swung away without wait-

ing for further directions, the pair moved off in that direction.

As they went along, they were aware they attracted considerable attention, but the fact did not trouble them.

Some of the loungers discussed the nature and intentions of the two strangers, but they asked no questions. Even the proprietor of the Rest knew nothing of their destination or their desires when they rode away from his hostelry.

"I see you found three horses?" said Ione, glancing askance at the animal the boy bestrode.

A peculiar sort of smile wrinkled the face of Bronco Billy.

"Call this a hoss? Reckon Kitsie'l feel compermented. Make ther boys laugh ter near yer. Kin swear ye'r a tenderfoot 'thout listenin' furdur."

"What should I call it?" laughed the young lady, who seemed strangely wanting in interest as to the journey before her, now the start had been made.

"Cayeuse, ov course! Think I'm a mill-yunaire?"

"Scarcely; but, what has that to do with the proper name of the animal?"

"Small boy kin own a cayeuse, but a real war hoss'd break him all up."

"Ah, then you are a lad of property. From the way you bargained with us, I should judge you were in a fair way to acquire wealth. Perhaps you own the entire outfit?"

"Nope. Lame Mike hez a clear title ter ther balance, onless yer looses 'em. Then I'm resonserable. Don't guess ary galoot would go back on me, though. On'y danger are they might git plugged."

"Do you really anticipate danger? One would think you did from the way you constantly throw out hints. Perhaps William has already received his quietus, and there is no use looking for him."

"More ner likely, more ner likely. It are a orful wicked world. Might be dangerous, ez you say, ef you didn't have me along ter perfect yer. Bad place fur tenderfoots, an' he seems real innercent. Not even a pop-gun in sight."

He nodded at the man who rode silent and grave at Ione's other side.

"Yes, he is peaceful enough—at times. But I don't see that you are much better armed. Should we be attacked on the way I hardly understand what you expect to rely on, unless it is my known courage. Your weapons are invisible, and I wouldn't like to trust much in the speed of your steed."

"Ever hear ov a singed cat? But, it ain't no use ter 'xplain. Ye'r a stranger, an' a peelgrim, so, how could yer know?"

"What?"

"When Billy Bird gits done fightin' thar ain't no use ter be talkin' 'bout runnin'. Him er ther other fellows 'll be past it, an' a cayeuse won't be necessary."

And as he spoke he suddenly slipped out of sight, throwing himself head downward alongside of his pony, which at the same time, guided in some unseen way, darted off the trail.

"No yer don't, Turney!" he shrilly shouted. "I got yer kivered, an' ef yer monkeys with ther mule I'll let drive."

CHAPTER II.

BRONCO BILLY'S BLUFF WINS.

THE movement of the boy was bewildering, yet it had its cause, as Ione discovered an instant later.

A man had suddenly risen up near the trail, and was watching the boy with savage intentness. If the look on his face went for anything he meant no good for the lad, who seemed to have caught sight of him the moment he stirred.

Turney had risen to his feet with a revolver in his hand; but, unfortunately for his intentions, the hammer was not thrust back, and the muzzle was not raised. After that warning he did not seem to care to do either, and lone, thrilling a little at a near view of a man whom she knew at a glance was a desperado, turned her head to see what the boy was doing.

He was still hanging over the side of his animal, keeping the body of it between him and Turney, but he was peering from under Kitsie's neck and the muzzle of a six-shooter was thrust forward, covering the desperado with a deadly aim.

"I wouldn't do it, Turney: I swar I wouldn't do it!" mockingly exclaimed the boy.

"Ye'r too clost up fur me ter miss, an' ef yer moves hand er foot I'll let drive. This hyer are my meat, an' I ain't lettin' yer kim poachin' this way tell I'm done with it."

There was no mistaking the rage in the face of the outlaw as he heard the threat and the defiance.

The wonder was that he did not try a snapshot and run the chances.

No doubt he would have done so had the boy been a stranger.

Fortunately, he knew Billy would fire at the motion, and though the pony might be killed it was more than likely he would go down at the same time, while, in any event, the boy would have at least another shot before a bullet could reach him.

At the same time, the bronco, which had been motionless as a statue, under a slight signal from his rider, began slowly and steadily to move around the outlaw. So smoothly did he step that the little hand thrust from under his neck never wavered. The intention of the boy evidently was to get further away from his charges.

"Flag ov truce, Billy!" growled the man. "You've got ther drop; an' a leetle finger kin pull trigger ez good ez a big one when ther barr'l are held straight."

"Which are ther way I all'ers hold it." "You ain't lyin'. Git yer leetle flock outen ther way, an' keep yer mouth shut. We'll even up ernother time. I don't reckon this war ther party I war after, nohow."

"Nuff ced. You go your way, an' we'll go ourn. An' you want ter step mighty keerful, er thar won't be no other time. This ain't fust 'cashun yer poked a finger in my 'fairs, an' it makes me tired. Once more an' I'll sallervate yer fur keeps."

"Once more goes." The desperado turned without another word, and strode away.

He did not appear to be either angered or cowed, but as a matter of prudence thought it best not to linger.

The movement did not take the boy off his guard, though he swung himself up into a more comfortable position the moment the man's back was toward him.

Not a word was said until the long strides of the fellow had carried him out of accurate revolver range.

"Don't like ther way he goes away. Never knew a bluff ter win with Turney, an' it looked ez though he war comin' fur more ner fun when he riz up. Wonders ef he hez a mule back thar in ther high grass?"

Ione was as troubled as the boy. She looked after the desperado until it seemed to be certain he did not intend to wheel and try it over.

Then, with a motion of her hand to her father, she silently drew her horse again into the road. Not a word had either of the two said; they had allowed their little guide to assume all the responsibilities of the situation.

Once moving again at a rapid rate toward the Double O, Billy seemed suddenly to be struck with an idea.

He fixed his sharp little black eyes on Ione.

"Pears ter me thet mae view, an' wa'n't after me, at all."

"That is a discovery. What makes you think so?"

"You two war so quiet. Couldn't hev cheeped smaller ef yer hed bin lookin' fur him. Say, what sort er a game be yer after, anyhow? an' whar do Turney come in at?"

"You are mistaken. So far as we know, Turney has nothing to do with us at all, unless as a couple of victims he fell in with by the road-side. I take it that he must be some sort of an outlaw. A bandit. A bad man, as I believe you call such beings here."

"Bad's no name fur it, an' he hez it in fur me big ez a b'ar. Thought he saw his time ter git even, I reckon; but, I ain't dead ready ter gamble on it yit. Looked ez though you might be his game, a'rter all."

"He dropped it very suddenly, then. From the way he accepted the law you laid down I am inclined to think he is not as dangerous as he looks. Is he—is he one of Colonel Dale's men?"

The sudden thought seemed to strike Ione with a great deal of force, and a darker shade swept over her face.

"Nary! Leastwise, I never heard ov it ef he are. Looks ez though he might be jest ther other thing."

"An enemy?"

"So reported; but I ain't believin' what I don't see. Fix it ter suit yerself. I know he ain't a friend ov mine an' that's good enough."

"An enemy he is, from his words and actions. Why?"

The boy chuckled as he answered:

"I'm leetle, but I'm good, an' this ain't ther fust time me an' him hez run foul ov each other. Oh, it war jest too lovely ther way I bin a gittin' ther drop on him. T'other time I hed a tenderfoot in tow, too. An' he thought he could hev a heap-sight fun with him an' me. He hed it."

"And you got the better of him on that occasion?"

Miss Ione looked doubtfully at the boy. Had it not been for what she had just seen she would have imagined he was romancing. Even yet she could hardly believe the scene had been real. If some one had told her even that the two were in some way connected together in a plot or scheme she would not have been altogether surprised. The more she thought of it the more it all appeared to be but the rehearsal of a bit from a play, which was to be continued on some other stage, and not at all to her advantage.

Billy was not aware of her thoughts, and he was evidently pleased with his own. He was only a boy, and could be pardoned for putting on side under the circumstances.

"I jest did. When I takes a tenderfoot under ther shadder ov my wing he's put thar fur keeps; an' you bet I kept him! An' I bin a-lookin' ever sence fur Bob ter take a shot at my mother's eldest. That's what's gettin' me. Why didn't he do it when he hed ther chance, an' not go ter puttin' on frills? He might a knowed I'd git away with his luggage ef he did. I tell yer, it can't be rubbed out; he wanted a sight at you."

"Or father?"

"P'rhaps—ef you think he's w'uth lookin' at when you're 'round."

The boy looked up with evident admiration at the fresh, fair face, but he was too young to bring a blush to it. Ione simply laughed.

In fact, she was continually laughing, though not in an obtrusive, or offensive, way. She found a great deal of amusement in this lad upon whom she had stumbled in the most unpremeditated way.

"Fact! Ef no one ain't told yer afore you kin hear it now, an' Bronco Billy Bird are a jedge ov good looks. More I see ov yer ther more I'm beflieted. Shouldn't wonder

ef thar war s'uthin' ther matter with me heart a'ready, an' thar's no knowing how wide open it's goin' ter be bu'sted afore this thing's over. Say! dollars an' cents ain't goin' ter count much afore we git through, an' ef yer don't throw off on him Billy Bird'll stick to yer solid. An' that means a heap. Yer may need me."

The face of the girl grew serious, and she held out her hand without a word. Something in the tones of the boy convinced her he was speaking from his heart, and she felt that such an offer was not to be despised.

"This is not the time nor place to tell you how nearly you have hit the mark; but I believe in you, and accept your friendship. For the present, it may be best for you to know no more. Yet, if you wish to ask me any questions I will answer them frankly, and honestly. I do not ask for a blind support; or, until confidence has been given, for any more loyal service thar money ought to buy."

"Let it go at that; let her go! When we git time, ez yer says, we kin talk it all over, an' this hyer ain't ther place ter be seen in confidential discourse. Thar's ther Double O now."

The pace had never slackened from the time they left the neighborhood where Bob Turney had interviewed them; and now, as they came over a slight rise in the ground, they could see in the distance a long, low, rambling building, with certain out-houses and stables supporting it.

The sight had a bracing effect. Ione took in the surrounding landscape with a long and keen look, while her father straightened himself up in the saddle.

The boy watched them both. It might be that they were simply in hopes of finding one William Webb there; but to him it seemed they expected something more serious. If they did not believe the time for danger and struggle had arrived he was very much mistaken.

As they looked, however, they became aware that something more than ordinary was taking place in the distance.

A cloud of dust was rolling up from the dry plain, and there was a rising sound that resembled a distant but nearing roar.

Ione was not certain what it meant, but Billy Bird understood at the first glance.

"Fun amazin' er I'm a howlin' leetle liar frum 'wayback! It's a big stampede, an' you'll hev a chance ter see how ther thing works. Keep cool now, both ov yer, er ther may be trouble. I wouldn't jest like ter swar what it means."

The caution was hardly needed. The three had simultaneously drawn rein, and each one realized that cattle by the thousand were running madly, and that the whole herd was bearing down straight upon the spot where they were stationed!

"Is there danger?" asked Ione, in a low tone of voice as she saw that unless there was a change soon made in their direction the whole herd would sweep over the spot they occupied.

"Can't prove it by me—yit. But, ef thar be it'll be a big one. Keep stiddy, an' be riddy ter hop when yer Uncle Ezry whistles. I wisht I knowed what it war all about."

CHAPTER III.

A STOLEN INTERVIEW.

THE Double O Ranch, which was owned and managed by Colonel Dale, covered acres by the thousand, and there were other acres on which his cattle wandered at will.

There were neighbors, of course; but they were such largely by courtesy, and in spite of the miles which lay between them. When Miss Daisy Dale wanted to borrow two teaspoonfuls of baking powder, or a handful of flour, or a teacup of sugar, she had to take a

good, long ride of at least ten miles, there and back.

Miss Daisy seldom did such borrowing, though she was the recognized directress of the household; but she took the ride occasionally, to keep in touch with the rest of womankind, even though she did not then find herself with particularly congenial spirits.

Not that she was overburdened with the cares of the household.

She had plenty of strong and tolerably able assistance, which she simply managed in a way to get the best results, without putting her hands to the work, save when it was a matter of pies and cakes—for which she had a genius, for some of the nicer matters of housekeeping in which she could find delight.

This morning, with a six-shooter in her waist-belt, she had chosen to start, unattended, and apparently with no very definite object in view, though she had told the colonel that she intended, probably, to drop in at Miles O'Flaherty's, for a word or two with his daughter, Norah.

This she cast back to the colonel from the mustang on which she was already mounted, and without giving him a chance to reply, shook slightly the loosened rein.

At this permission the animal darted away, and the words the colonel sought to call after her were lost in the rattle of hoofs, and the enthusiasm of the start.

It was a long five miles to the dwelling of Miles O'Flaherty, and her errand there was thoroughly unimportant. The real motive for the visit was the ride, and Miss Daisy intended to enjoy it to the utmost. Perhaps she expected certain little incidental happenings which were entirely unsuspected by the colonel, and of which she had given no hint.

On the other hand, there was a reticence on the part of the colonel, after that first unavailing exclamation.

He watched her gallop away without any effort to check her, muttering to himself:

"Let the girl go. It is not likely danger can come to her; and she has plenty of woman's wit, and being a crack shot, can defend herself till help can come to her. Besides, they would hardly dare."

What might be dared, and by whom, he did not care to put into words. Had he done so, and could they have reached the ears of Dashing Daisy, they would hardly have checked her flight. She rather loved danger on its own account.

For some little distance the mustang went along at a great rate; then its mistress controlled its speed somewhat, giving it opportunity to regain its second wind, and prepare for the long, sweeping gallop by which the rest of the way was to be devoured.

The dwelling of the O'Flaherties was reached without effort or adventure, and Miss Norah was found with her arms up to the elbows in a pan of dough. Handicapped after this fashion her greetings were done by word of mouth, and so, were a little cold compared to what they were when both hands were free, and she had the opportunity to embrace Dashing Daisy after her own free will.

She was voluble enough, however, and finished her present labors in a hurry. After that, the two had quite a friendly talk; the pattern which was the ostensible object of the visit was found, and the caller departed.

For half a mile or more Daisy Dale retraced her steps at a flying gait.

By that time she was fairly out of sight of the house she had left, a rise or swell in the land concealed her.

Without hesitation she turned to the right, increasing her speed somewhat for a mile, when she sharply drew in her mustang, and slid lightly from his back.

The spot certainly was lonely enough to make an unprotected female shiver, but Dashing Daisy did not appear to be affected by it. She did touch the spot where a little

having the time, but the movement was insidious, and she had no thought that she might soon have use for the weapon.

She swung the lines over the head of her mustang, allowing it to wander at its will, while she looked sharply around, and then examined the ground at her feet.

There was a regular trail leading to the spot, and there were no footprints to indicate that it had lately been visited. She frowned a little, and pursed up her lips, as she glanced up at the sun. Like most persons who live on the frontier the sun was as good to her as a clock, and after that glance she could have told the apparent time within a few minutes.

"He should have been here, waiting for me," she muttered; and crossing her hands behind her back began to pace up and down over a beat of a few yards, her head cast down, and her whole countenance indicative of thought.

Perhaps five minutes had been spent in this way when she halted, looked again at the sun, and stamped her little foot impatiently.

A mocking laugh greeted the action, and it was not from her lips, either.

She turned swiftly to find herself face to face with a young man, probably three or four years her elder.

"No use, Daiz!" he said, coming forward. "It will never do for you to try to play sentinel. Your camp will be liable to surprise, and the works to capture," and before he had time to guess what was coming, he had thrown his arm around her waist, and imprinted a hearty kiss on her lips.

"You young villain!" was her answer. "If you don't learn to move more promptly at the word of command you will get a warmer reception than that, some time—or cause no end of mischief."

"You must make allowances, my dear. I have ridden a good twenty-five miles since after sun-up; and I have the prospect of as much more work in the saddle before I get my dinner."

"Fifty miles of a morning? That is almost a day's work of itself."

"Oh, no. That is the fun of it. The work lies in something else, and I never would have dropped it to get here if it had not been for a bit of news I have picked up, and which you ought to know."

"It must be important," assumed Daisy, her face wearing at once a troubled look.

"That is as it happens. You can judge for yourself. Uncle William is on his way to the Double O. When he and father meet it is for you to guess what is going to happen."

"Oh, I hope not; I hope not!"

"So do I; but there is a chance there will be killing, all the same. What is to be done about it?"

"If you could only be at home! Surely you might be able to devise some means to save all the misery that may come of it."

"Excuse me! I was at home once, unfortunately, and you know what came of it. I am not so certain the old gentleman would not drop all other holds and kill the undersigned. I don't think it would be safe to run many chances."

"True, true. And that would be the worst of all."

"To say nothing of the fact that the old gentleman is abundantly able to take care of himself; and if Uncle William steps over the range with his boots on, about any coroner's jury which can be summoned in these parts will return a verdict of: 'Served him right.'"

"Why will you call him Uncle William? I am sure he is no relation of ours."

"That is unimportant as compared with the verdict hereinbefore mentioned. But, all the same, I stick to the title. He is undoubtedly the brother of the lady who was

promoted to the position of mother to us motherless bairns. He is also coming with hostile thoughts intent. In addition, being an outcast from my father's mansion—wholly and entirely on account of complications arising from that same mother-in-law of ours—I cannot there abide, to pour oil on the troubled waters, or play my well-known role of peacemaker in general. Could I only be on the spot, I would doubtless shoot him myself, which would save a world of trouble to our worthy progenitor."

"How can you?"

"How could I, you mean? Simplest thing in the world. Address a few of the soothing remarks for which I am noted, to the avenger. One word brings another. He pulls before witnesses, and—biff! I have him, shot in the midriff."

"Oh, horrors!"

"Or any other spot you think more appropriate. I thought some of heading him off; but the trouble is, he must be allowed to develop his intentions or it would look too much like genteel murder. And then, I couldn't get away. Things are in quite an uncomfortable shape on the ranges, and I wouldn't be surprised to see a war break out any day. I can't say, even, that I like to see you wandering alone over the plains. When things do break loose in the happy valley it will work up a merry havoc, and don't you forget it."

"And oh, Ed, for my sake, do keep out of it as much as you can. It seems so ridiculous for men to be fighting, and risking their lives, and all that, about a little water, and a few wires. Why some of them will get killed!"

"All of them will probably get killed, and most likely a few over. What you want to do is to keep your foolish little head out of it; and that of the old gentleman also, if by any manner of means it can be done. I will look out for him as well as I can, if he happens to be my way, and we will have to trust to Providence for the rest. But, after all, it is Uncle William I am most afraid of. The rest is pure business, and along the line of that we Dales can hold our own. I don't know which I would sooner have father be doing: interviewing our late step-mother's brother, or fighting the rustlers."

"Both are bad enough. I'll see what I can do to keep him from either, though the task seems hopeless. If you were only at home!"

"Thanks. It would be nice enough, but things can't always be as we want them. Perhaps the old gentleman will come around some day. Meantime, I am wanted very badly somewhere else, so I'll have to bid you a good-morning. Take care of yourself, and I'll see you again when the war is over."

After that there was a little leave-taking between this brother and sister who could not be kept apart permanently even by a father's vigilance, and a question of miles. Ed Dale went galloping back toward the Three Link Ranch, while Daisy turned her mustang homeward, as she went troubling her head concerning the things of which she had just been hearing.

If she had known how her father had been spending his time during her absence she would have been troubled yet more.

CHAPTER IV.

CLEVERLY ROPED.

WHEN Daisy rode away from the Double O her father was leisurely smoking a cigar. By the time she was fairly out of sight his mood appeared to have changed, for he was striding away to the stables as if in haste.

No one was about, for a wonder, but he did not wait. With his own hand he sad-

dled a horse, and mounting it without delay, he galloped off in the direction taken by his daughter.

He had no intention of following her, or interfering with the trip she had announced, though, if he could have overtaken her, he would have given her the caution she had not waited to hear.

His course only lay along that trail for a short distance, when he veered to the left. There was a herd of cattle somewhere in that direction which he wished to visit, and having passed through a convenient gate he was soon galloping through the immense pasture, which stretched back for miles.

Between the Double O and the town of Boot Jack the prairie was open, while on the other side of the trail which led past the residence of Colonel Dale, the wires strung out for miles, deflecting some little before reaching O'Flaherty's, but not by any means ending there.

Through the center of the pasture ran a stream which, by some people might have been called a river, though for the most part, in the summer months it was neither deep, wide, nor rapid in its current. It was just of value because it furnished water to thousands of cattle—which in this country amounted to a great deal.

The colonel had ridden some miles, and as yet had seen no signs of either the man or the cattle for whom he was looking.

In that, however, he was not disappointed. He did not expect to meet them before crossing the stream, the banks of which were now near at hand.

A line of timber cut off the view of what might lie beyond.

He rode down carelessly to the bank, for just here there was no danger from quicksand, and the water could be forded at any place.

Here and there were pools which might necessitate swimming for a few yards if by chance one of them was struck; but there was little danger in that, and the colonel thought he knew the stream well enough to avoid any such trouble.

There were cattle trails also, where the animals went down to drink, or to ford the stream; and it was by one of these Dale made his way down the low bluff.

The way presented no difficulties, and when the horse had stepped a few feet into the water he halted and thrust down his nose for a drink.

Loosening the reins so as to give the animal plenty of play for his head, it was natural for the colonel at the same time to bend forward and peer aimlessly at the slowly running stream.

Just at that moment, when he was totally off his guard—swish! The running noose of a lasso encircled his shoulders, and was then drawn tight.

After that, all the strength or skill in the world would have been of little avail. There was no purchase to be had to break or throw off the tightening rope, and when a skillful jerk was given the colonel dropped heavily from the saddle.

At the same time, a second rope shot forward, aimed at the head of the horse, which seemed to have but just scented danger.

The result was not a success like the other cast had been.

The horse was wary, and perhaps was favored by chance. A toss of the head, a quick side spring, and he was out of danger and away!

A harsh voice uttered a muttered curse, and two men sprung forward, one of them throwing up a pistol, the hammer flying back as it came into line.

Fortunately for the animal it did not attempt to cross the stream; nor did it turn squarely, to retrace its steps. It kept on along the edge, thus saving itself from the fatal shot which would have come had it

presented a broadside view, and giving the men time for second thought.

"Stiddy, pard! Yer can't throw him cold with a chunk of lead that bigness, an' ef powder begins ter burn now thar's no tellin' when it'll stop. Hold on a bit tell we see whar he's goin' to. Mebbe it'll be ez well ter let him run."

As he spoke the man laid his hand warningly on the arm of his companion.

"Jesso, Hard Hank. An' ez ther condemned caycuse are goin' back ther way he come we ain't no call ter growl, though he are wu'th a cold hundred even ther way hosses are goin'. Hov ter twist so much more out ov ther old man. Skippers hez got him tight, aryhov. Ketch hold."

Hard Hank was known at Boot Jack as a rough, sport and all around bad man, but he seemed not altogether new at this line of business.

The horse scrambled out on the same side by which he had entered, and was no longer a source of immediate anxiety; so the two, reinforced by the third, who was the man who threw the lasso, were at liberty to pay their attention to the colonel.

The delay at best had only been momentary, and before Dale, who had been confused, if not stunned, by his fall, had gathered himself together for anything like a struggle, they were upon him.

After that, it was the work of but a moment to bind his hands, disarm him, and search his pockets for valuables.

The booty was by no means to be despised.

Colonel Dale carried a fat wallet, and three pair of eyes gloated over its contents as they were turned out into the hand of Hard Hank, who claimed the office of treasurer.

"Not a bad haul," said Skeeters, watching keenly to take an account of every dollar.

"Half a thousand if there's a cent, and if Jesso Jimmy had swung his rope a little sooner he'd have been a hundred more ahead. Don't know but what we ought to count it out of his share."

"Dry up with yer funnin'," growled Hank.

"This are on'y ther plums to ther puddin'. We got ther wu't part ov ther job afore us. We'll talk 'bout ther divy when we gits through, an' sees how many ov us thar be ter devide."

Interested as they were in the contents of the colonel's wallet they were careful enough that the prisoner should have no chance to escape. Now, they turned their attention entirely to him, Hank thrusting away the booty with a resolute air.

Dale was recovering his wits, and when he gave his first deliberate stare at his captors it was to see that Jesso Jimmy was holding over him with a cocked revolver, apparently waiting for the moment when the prisoner could understand a trifle of plain talk.

"You kin see now, I reckon?" Jesso Jimmy remarked, as the colonel's eyes flashed with recognition.

"You ain't one ov ther squawkin' kind so we ain't thunk it wu'th while ter bother with a gaggin' ov yer. Fur fear yer might be tempted too hard I'd jest remark, ther fu'st squeal an' ther ca'tridge bu'sts. It'll on'y be a shorter endin', though it may sp'ile yer last chances. You understands?"

The face of the prisoner showed that he did understand, but he never moved a particle nor uttered so much as a syllable.

"I ain't one ov yer frien's; an' thar ain't none ov us yer frien's. We all bin a-waitin' fur more er less ter git even, an' that time's about hyer now. We got a leetle journey ter take fu'st, to whar we kin meet ther rest ov ther gang, an' what we wants ter know are, ef yer are goin' peaceable, or ef we must drag yer. Don't want ter sp'ile yer best

britches, but ef it has ter be so you bet we'll do it right."

Jimmy's voice quivered with hate as he spoke, and Skeeters looked up anxiously, almost afraid that he was going to pull trigger.

"The threat is not necessary," answered the colonel calmly, and for the first time uttering a sound. "I may as well go. You have me fairly roped, and I'm willing to see the limit you are willing to play to."

"Ay, we have you roped," put in Skippers; "and don't you fear but what we will have you branded before we turn you loose. It has taken some time, but we were bound to have you foul, atlast. When you hung Dandy Davy I swore to pay you for the job, and there's not a man in the gang who hasn't got just as big an account. March!"

They did not intend to trust him, even yet. Skeeters had a hand on one shoulder, Hank on the other, and he moved away between them, with Jesso Jimmy and his cocked revolver in the rear. Escape was impossible.

Colonel Dale knew that in all probability there were half a dozen of his men within hearing of a pistol-shot, and that on the sound they would without a doubt come to investigate; but he was not caring that the shot should be given if it meant a bullet through his brain; and about the desperation of the intentions of these men he had no doubt.

The journey he was called upon to take was not a long one, for fifteen minutes later a halt was called, and he found himself surrounded by the rest of "the gang," as Jimmy had called them.

Half a dozen men in all were gathered in a little timber motte, and the presence of the prisoner seemed to call forth no great excitement. The minds of all had been made up long ago, and now their enemy was in their hands, they only wanted to silently carry out their purposes to the bitter end.

The spot was one well suited for a lurking place, since at a little distance the hidden figures could not be discovered, and should the herd or its herders approach nearer, there was every opportunity for defense while there was a line of retreat screened from observation by the trend of the land.

These men might have been waiting there for a week.

There was some little low-toned conversation and then Jimmy came to the front again.

"Bad thing, kunnell, thet ther Double O are short-handed; but we'd be riddy, all ther same, ter try our game ef ther hull dozen war at ther front. You've hed your fun with our pards, when you war at one end ov ther rope, an' they war at the other. Some ov us wants ter hev sich a game now, with us on ther right end."

"I'm willing," retorted the colonel, sharply. "I'll do my level best to make it amusing, though I don't know that I can lift the whole of them at one time."

"Thankee, kunnell. You won't hev ter try. We're goin' ter give yer a free ride, an' all yer will hev ter look out fur is that yer don't git inter the wire fence. Skippers an' Hank are gone ter git yer a charger, an' when we mount yer on him, you bet you'll ride to ther devil."

Dale neither started nor paled, though he imagined at once what was the meaning of the speaker. He had heard of just such rides before, and they generally ended with a death.

CHAPTER V

MANEPPA ON A MAVERICK.

COLONEL DALE had known for a long while that some of these men were waiting for him, and had known also, that they were desperate enough to dare anything when the time seemed ripe.

He had neither feared nor shunned them, though he certainly had not expected to fall into their power. It had always appeared to him that his hands could keep his head.

He knew, then, this was no new grudge; but, at the same time, he could believe that it was only a chance which gave them opportunity to work their revenge, and that he had simply blindly run into their power.

At the same time, they would not have been hidden there without an object, and he would have given something to find out what that object was.

He regretted he had not bent his energies from the first to its discovery, and wondered if it was too late now to start the conversation afresh, with the hope of developing the scheme that was still hidden.

It was too late for that, however.

Carefully as he attempted to veil his intentions, they were discovered, or, at least, suspected, and all the result of the biting words he said was to fill in a little time which otherwise might have had something dreadful in its passing.

Then, Skippers and Hard Hank returned; and they came with a rush.

Dale shivered, though he had been suspecting.

The two men were ropers of no slight skill, and between them, a lasso reaching from either side of his shaggy head, they guided a roaring maverick, a bull, who for the most part imagined he was charging straight after the man who rode directly in his front.

When Hank and his pard left the group, a bit before, they knew just where to look for the sullen, savage, lonely monster, and they had brought him with them after a fashion which would have been a wonder to men less acquainted with such ways and means. The appearance of the routing brute was simply greeted with a suppressed laugh; and then a third lasso was cast.

The loop caught a foot, and, though with such masters as the two already at the front it was not needed, it helped materially to fling the animal, and hold him steady while he was temporarily tied.

Even yet his spirit was not broken, and there was no delay. The fiercer he might be when once more on his feet the better it would suit these men.

"All ready, kunnell! Git aboard!"

The cry came from Hard Hank, and the men did not wait for Dale to answer.

He was swung off his feet, a dozen hands caught him and flung him upon the back of the animal, where he was hastily but firmly bound.

"That's comf'ble ez yer chooses. We owed yer one ever sence yer hung Pard Davy, an' I reckon we're payin' it back in great style. Would yer like a minnit er two longer, er shell we letter go?"

Hank looked down into the face of the colonel; but the slight glance he met caused him to start back in spite of himself.

There was no weakening there; and no fear.

Only, the savage resolve to pay it all back with interest even greater than that of which the ruffian had been boasting.

"Better not swing too much style," remarked Skippers, who saw the movement.

"Just cut loose all round, and let them go. If he lives through it I'll jump the country."

"Better cut his throat right now ef ye'r afeared ov him."

The answer was a bluff, and Skippers knew it.

With strange perversity—he had been one of the leaders in the daring scheme—he whipped out his revolvers.

"Not this day, Hard Hank. Some other time, perhaps, when Skippers ain't at the front. You worked it up to suit your own royal will, and now we'll give him a chance

for his life if it lifts the hair off. Throw off the ropes, and let them roll."

"That's the talk. Hank is afeared ov ther afterclaps! Off they are."

Such words came in answer from the rest, and though Hank glared around as though he would like to have a chance at them all, he answered nothing. In the excitement of the moment he knew a few rash words might stir up a wrath against himself which he would find it hard to face.

It was not without some risk to themselves that these men started out the colonel on his Mazeppa flight.

What taurus would do under the circumstances was not at all certain, for in his anger it was certain he felt the load upon his back no more than if it had been a feather.

Yet hands were there which were willing to help the animal up if he needed help, even though he might think only of turning to toss his aiders.

For a moment there was a pawing, a bellowing, and a rooting, which would have struck terror to the hearts of men less used to such things. Then, straight as an arrow from a bow, the bull dashed forward, goaded somewhat by the heavy stroke of a whip upon his flank, but angered more yet by that load upon his back which he did not understand, and at which he would have looked, if he could, more in anger than in terror.

"Will he keep the steam up and strike the fence?" asked Skippers, coolly watching the headlong flight of the maddened brute.

"He'll go tell he drops, an' ef nothin' stops him that'll be a good, long while. Jess so."

"You think, Jimmy. Maybe it will; but it wouldn't be a bad scheme if some of you boys were there to unload him when the time comes. I'm in it with the rest; but it looks as though he might be a hard man to down. Look at that."

One of the colonel's hands had been loosened, and now it arose in the air. Clinched and steady it shook defiance at the men he had left behind. Silent though its owner was, no one who saw it but what heard the oath that went with the gesture. There might be another reckoning; and Colonel Dale was a bad man to deal with when he went out on the war-path.

Silent though the colonel might be his bovine charger made noise enough for two or a dozen. Over the quiet plains the sounds rolled, and they might have been heard for miles.

One of the gang spoke of it.

"Reckon that'll wake some ov'em up. Ef they don't come nosin' 'round ter see what are ther matter I'll say they're all deaf, er mighty much skeered. Better be gittin' a ready on."

"That's what we want; an I sw'ar, I b'lieve the'r a-comin' now."

The answer was hardly given before when the game developed. Through the fringing timber of the stream, half a mile away, burst the advance guard of the main herd, and with heads up, and tails straight out, went charging after the strangely freighted maverick, which was passing them at a distance of not over forty rods.

"By the living Moses!" exclaimed Skippers.

"The cubs have got in their work, sure enough. There will be lots of fun going now, and we will miss the best of it. Back all, out of sight, until I can see what follows, but be ready for the word. When I give it there'll be no time to lose. We must strike for the ranch."

Back into concealment dodged the men, while Skippers, who was assuming the post of commander, threw himself flat upon the ground and watched the scene with a cruel sneer around his lips.

From the further side of the river could be heard the sound of voices and a few scattering shots. It took peculiar nerve to

lie there quietly without making further movement to find out what was going on.

Perhaps they could guess; but guessing is a poor occupation when matters of life and death are at hand.

The stream of cattle continued to pour from the timber line, the forest of horns to broaden. Without delay or hesitation the herd followed after the flying maverick, apparently gaining on him every instant. It took little observation to show Skippers that they would overtake or surround him in a very few minutes.

The fate of the colonel looked certain, and the watcher shrugged his shoulders. The race had become a stampede, and as yet there was no one to stay it. Even his own gang would have had their hands full if they had undertaken to mill the herd, and as yet there were no riders in sight, who might attempt the feat, or come to the assistance of the man of the Double O Ranch.

The fence was some distance off, but Skippers could guess well enough the catastrophe which was there to occur.

It was stout and firm. There were four tightly stretched barb wires, fastened to iron posts, but it must go down before that rush, and with it would go hundreds of cattle—and certainly the colonel.

If the animal to which he was lashed maintained his lead he could not hope to leap it with that load upon his back; and if he ever went down there were a thousand sharp hoofs behind to trample life and shape out of man and beast.

The herd gained faster, and were near to the leader, so near that even the keen gaze of the watcher could no longer distinguish the form of the victim. There was a crash at the fence, which he almost imagined he could hear, and then he turned to the men behind him.

"The cubs have got in their work all right, and the fun here is over. Now, for the ranch!"

CHAPTER VI.

BILLY BIRD IN BUSINESS.

BRONCO BILLY and his convoy were just in time to place themselves squarely athwart the course of the maddened cattle.

Unless they wanted to start on a wild race back toward Boot Jack, there was nothing for them to do but remain and wait developments.

Even the unpracticed eyes of the strangers told them it would be madness to go forward until the herd had swept on or by.

Billy was cool enough, but he was somewhat troubled.

Though it was not absolutely certain these cattle were from the Double O, yet it was not likely they could have come from anywhere else.

If that was true, their presence perplexed him.

He knew that usually they had not only herders but a wire fence to restrain them, and it did not seem possible they could have broken out after such a fashion, unless there was some strong and strange cause.

He could hardly believe cattle-lifters were at work in broad daylight, and so early in the day as that. Yet, what other explanation could be given? He looked away to the further end of the stampede, but could see no signs of mounted men in pursuit; and for the moment was fairly puzzled.

As his eyes roved back, along the edge of the herd, they lit upon something which caused him to start even more than the late appearance of Turney had done.

"Holy gee! Look yander!"

His finger pointed at one foam-flecked animal, which, with head down, and savage determination in its strides, was lumbering along on the outskirts, though trying its best to keep at the head of the procession.

"What—ah, I see. Heavens!"

Cool as Ione [could be, the sight quite unnerved her. It was well that just then there was no call made upon her coolness and her wits.

"It is a man lashed to the back of the brute. Who could have done the dastard act?"

"Great paw-paws! Who's ther feller? That's what we want ter be knowin'; an' how we kin git him out. Ther rest kin keep. It is! Yes, by glory, it is!"

"Kunnel Dave, ov course. Ef yer wants ter see him bad thar's a mighty fine chance ter intervoo him. Ef yer must have him, go fur him, now."

He waved his hand; but he did not turn his eyes. His wits were coming back, and he was already mapping out a course. Certainly, he did not think the girl at his side could be of any assistance.

As for her companion—he had so little to say at any time that Billy had almost forgotten his existence.

Ione did not admire the tone, but she had no time to rebuke it.

"I am ready to make the effort. If you can think of any plan say it quick. The man must be saved. If you know nothing better I will ride down and do my best. Here goes!"

"Hold on a minnit! Hold on! He's got his chances. Ez long ez he keeps out ov ther herd thar ain't much more danger than he's bin in; an' he ain't dead yit. Ther danger are that he'll git tangled up in ther crowd an' drap. Ef he does that—good by, John!"

"But how can we prevent it? See! He is trying to edge into it now."

"That's just it. We must take keer not ter make it wuss. We must give 'em a chance ter supparate; an' then try ter head him out, er t'others away from him. You ain't goin' ter do much good; but I'll try what I kin. Ef you'll keep out ov misch'if it's ther best we kin ask."

Then Billy clucked to his Pony, and began to ride carelessly down.

He was young, but he was a boy of vast experience; and he understood the work that was before him. Cutting out the animal he had in view was a task he would not have hesitated at all to undertake had there not been a human life besides his own at stake.

Ione watched him go.

She did not fear the danger, but she had understood the force of the boy's words, and was waiting till she could see her chance.

"Dunno ez it's a safe thing ter use my shooters," he muttered, looking again obliquely down the line, to see if there was anything coming behind it.

"Kinder 'okard ter be caught with ther barr'ls empty an' ther rustlers out fur blood an' ha'r. But I got ter split him out some way."

The pony understood the work required as well as his master. He also was little, but he was good. He responded to the pressure of the knees which Billy gave, and increased his pace. With the light weight up he flew along, with the springy stride of an animal out for fun.

Just then, probably on account of the lay of the ground, the leading cattle deflected to the right.

By some mysterious sympathy the movement was felt through the whole stampeding herd, wild though it was with excitement, and perhaps with fear.

The variation of course was not great at first, but it gave Billy the chance for which he was hoping.

The maverick with the burden did not swerve with the rest.

He had been a lonely fellow, accustomed to follow his own sweet will, and this herd was none of his. He went straight on, apparently oblivious of the boy who, having made something of a circle was now creep-

ing up on his right flank, riding fearlessly, and dangerously close to the tossing horns beyond him.

And just then, with wild shouts, and a cracking of revolvers, Ione and her companion rode at the head of the already swerving herd, and made the separation more certain and complete.

Another glance along the line showed Billy that he was out of the way of the flankers who were running free of the main body; and he felt that, barring accidents, he had the game in his own hands.

He had been carrying a navy six, ready for use in case the worst came to the worst, but now he thrust it away, and reached for the coil of rope which swung at his saddle. An older man might have envied him the deliberation with which he glanced at it, and then swung it gravely around his head.

The noose hurtled through the air and caught. The bronco, wise in such encounters, thrust its toes savagely downward, and stiffened its legs to stand the strain; and the bull, roped with a skill which even Skippers could not have surpassed, plunged headlong forward, measuring its length on the ground.

Billy did not wait to see how it had fared with the colonel in the fall. There was danger that Dale might be crushed, but of that he had to take his chances. The boy knew what other work he had to do, and that no time was to be wasted over it. It was not the first time he had roped and tied a bull, and he intended to finish that job first of all.

He had no thought of aid from any one in the operation, yet aid was coming, whether at that moment he desired it or not.

Ione and her father were riding down upon the spot, and Stewart Webb drew in his horse, and sprung to the ground but an instant later than the boy.

From the time of the discovery of the stampede he had not said a word; but what little he did was the right thing in the right place. If Billy had watched him he might have opened his eyes, and pronounced him not quite as much of a tenderfoot as he had thought.

His coming was fortunate enough.

Billy's rope was stretched taut, and he needed but a few seconds to complete his task; but the seconds were not his.

With a sudden jolt the lasso parted; the pony went backward in a tangled heap, while the bull, with the unwilling load still on its back, struggled to its feet.

The animal was ready for fight or retreat, as the chance was offered, and as it plunged forward from under the hurrying hands of Billy Bird, it left the latter at a disadvantage when he hastily tore out the revolver, on which he felt he must now depend. It was not so easy to fire a certain shot from behind, and the sight of the white-faced, helpless colonel went far to bewildering the lad.

It was fortunate just then that Stewart Webb was standing right in front of the maverick, and that he did not hesitate what to do. With the bound of a panther he sprung straight between the long, sharp horns, and fastened his gripe around them, well down at the roots.

After that there was a swaying and a struggle, a mighty heave, and again the bull went down.

"Quick with your strings, youngster. I have him now, but I can't hold him here all day. I'm getting too old for that sort of work."

"Ye'r jest a bully age, an' I'll never say tenderfoot ag'in. I've hearn ov sich a trick, but I never see'd it done afore. When we get time I'll git yer to show me how. How are yer, kunnel? All right to ther present time?"

The answer was feeble, but distinct.

"All right, but for heaven's sake get me out of this, quick. I can stand no more of it, and I must keep my wits about me. This

outrage on me is not the worst thing I have to think about. And yet, for it, I'll have revenge—I'll have revenge!"

For answer to the savage burst from the strengthening lips Billy's knife cut swiftly through the ropes which bound the colonel on; and as the latter would have rolled to the ground the arms of Stewart Webb received him.

Ione slipped nimbly from her saddle and came forward to act as a ministering spirit if the occasion required.

There were flecks of blood, and signs of bruises, on the colonel, but it was not because of any serious injuries that he lay quiet, with closed eyelids, in the arms that sustained him.

Man of nerve though he might be he had been sorely tried, and the re-action he was now feeling tied his hands and brains as completely as though he had been stricken with a pistol bullet.

It was only for a little, however.

Color came back to his face, strength to his limbs, and drawing himself from the arms that had been holding him he rose to his feet, and looked Stewart Webb full in the face.

Recognition was instant. His hand had been outstretched, and words of thanks were on his lips, but he drew back as though he had received another blow.

"You here, Stewart Webb? What is the meaning of it? Is this some of your work?"

He pointed down at the maverick; tied beyond escape, and which had been conquered at last.

"The boy roped it, and tied it, and ought to have the credit for the work, but if I had not been here he might have found the job too much for him. I took a hand in when it was needed, and am glad to see you safe."

"Be done with your play on words! You know what I mean. Is this some of the vengeance you vowed once upon a time? If not, what are you doing here?"

"It's not exactly the way I have of getting even, and if I was a younger man I would draw on you for suggesting it. Let it go at that for the present. You said you had something else to think about. Don't waste time, man. If there is any one else in danger you ought to know what to do, and be doing it. Why I came here—and Ione with me—will keep. If I knew just why this was done I would be better able to counsel; but if there is a pinch you can count on me till it is over. And you know that is saying a good deal."

Straight along Webb spoke, without anger or interest. It might have been a machine speaking; yet the colonel understood, and was moved.

"Right you are, and our little difference can keep. I can trust you. We will find something wrong at the ranch. Come with me. We will see."

He would have started on foot; and without ever noticing Billy or the girl.

Billy was not angered by the slight, though he had turned a glance of surprise on the man who was blossoming out so far beyond anything he could have thought possible.

"Some gerloot cut a nick in my rope er I wouldn't 'a' hed ter call on him, kunnel; but that's neither hyer ner thar. You kin back my cayuse fur ther trip, an' ef I don't git thar soon ez ther rest thar's no harm done. Hyer yer be."

Ione said nothing, and Dale sprung into the saddle without a word to either of them, and led the way. Webb and his daughter mounted also, and started at gallop; while Billy carelessly caught at Webb's stirrup leather, and trotted along by his side with strides which carried him over the ground as fast as the rest.

And as they started they heard the sound of distant firing, in the direction of the ranch, and knew there was trouble there.

CHAPTER VII.

DAISY'S DESPERATE DASH.

DASHING DAISY rode along at an easy gait, not paying much attention to the world around her. She was thinking of the intelligence her brother had brought her.

The colonel had lived a careless sort of life, and had done a good many things which were neither wise nor prudent, but the worst thing he ever did, according to the thinking of his children, was when he married his second wife; who had remained long enough with him to totally disorganize his family, create a bitter state of feeling between Dale and her brother—who blindly took her side in certain differences which occurred, and then disappeared, to the disgust, and perhaps to the secret relief, of the colonel.

Stewart Webb had met the colonel once since then, though not at the ranch, and it was a near thing that one or both of them did not pass away from that interview feet foremost.

Certain threats were then made, on both sides, which seemed to indicate that if another meeting took place it would not be bloodless; and it seemed the hour for that meeting had now come.

Her brother did not appear to be concerned about it as she could have wished.

Perhaps he knew his father better than the young lady; and perhaps, as he had been turned adrift because of some straightforward talk concerning the madame, he did not think it his place to interfere too broadly in the affairs which came along as a consequence of her late presence at the Double O Ranch. It was somewhat cruel-kindness to warn Daisy; yet it would have been more cruel still if any trouble had been allowed to come upon her without notice.

So she thought as she made her way homeward, trying to shape a course which would tend to prevent the evil she feared.

Her father knew nothing of these meetings with her brother, and she did not care to enlighten him. Of course, he could not know that she had shortened her call at the O'Flaherty's, or lingered along the road; but it seemed so to her imagination, and after a little she spoke to her horse, drew herself up in the saddle, and determined to leave the consideration of her troubles to such time as they should arrive.

The result was, she had some thought once more, for the things around her.

It was fortunate perhaps, that such was the case.

She heard ahead of her the tumult of the stampede; and not exactly knowing what it might all mean increased her speed, and at the same time redoubled her caution.

She was too late to see the herd dash away in the charge before which the wire fence went down, involving a hundred cattle in its wreck; but she caught a glimpse of a little body of horsemen who evidently were not trying to stop it.

They had just come out from the motte where they had been in hiding, and though they did not know it there was something in their manner which betokened skulkers. Their eyes followed the herd, and they thought nothing of what might be in their rear, or they would perhaps have had a glimpse of Daisy, who had pulled in her mustang, and was watching them with a troubled air.

"They are after no good," she thought.

"It looks as though they might have stampeded the herd; and if I am not mistaken there is more than one man there who has sworn vengeance against father. It would not be well for them, or him, if they met just now."

She thought nothing of any danger to herself; and, indeed, so long as she acted with prudence, she was in none. The mustang she rode had the heels of anything there; and she was a remarkably sure shot with the

revolver she always carried when on her lonely trips.

But as they broke into a gallop the thought flashed across her mind that they were bound for the ranch; and intended to work mischief when they got there.

Although the Double O generally employed a dozen men, yet she remembered that just now there were few, if any, of them about the place; and it was possible something had happened to the three or four who should have been with the herd.

If these men came unannounced they might work more ruin there than they had done here.

Instantly, her wits began to work, planning how she could head them off, and give her father notice of their coming.

The men were following the trail by this time. They might only intend to keep in the wake of the cattle, but their delay made her doubtful. She believed they would keep to the right when they came to where the trail forked, and they already had a long start. She had no time to waste in thought; how was she to act?

At least the effort should be made; and there was a bare chance it would be successful.

Her easy going mustang made no clatter as he stole swiftly along to where the wire was down, and here she turned into the inclosure, and headed straight for the house. It was the nearest route, though there were several difficulties which she would have to surmount. At one place at least she would have to take a risk that was a horrible one to her to think of.

For a little she was in plain view of the gang should they look back, but she cared nothing for that. They might perhaps ride a little faster if they saw her, but the chances were it would just be the other way. That idea came to her; and another with it.

She drew her revolver, leveled it with an allowance of elevation that would give it the greatest range, and pulled the trigger. She did not expect to do any damage, and was not disappointed.

The result was, a sudden halt, and face about, to see where the bullet had come from which dropped not far away.

They saw a mounted girl, flitting away across the level sward, and recognized her at once.

The ruse was successful. At least a minute was lost while the men discussed the apparition and that meant the loss of perhaps a quarter of a mile. When two separated from the main force, and attempted to follow in her wake she was already on even terms with them, provided she met with no mishaps. For the direct pursuit she cared not a particle.

She knew well enough that she had gone seven or eight miles that morning, but with her weight up, and the careful way she had ridden, that counted for nothing in the short race before her, though she had set her even, white teeth with a click as she thought she must win.

The men who remained on the trail swept on, but their pace was not even as rapid as it had been before. They were hampered by their desire to see the result of the chase; and they did not think the ending of it could be long delayed.

Glancing over her shoulder Daisy saw this, and almost smiled. It seemed to her she had been wise in announcing her presence.

Then she turned her attention more particularly to the pair, who had gained somewhat, and seemed, in nautical parlance, to be overhauling her, hand over fist.

One of them, Skippers, was already swinging his lasso around his head, though the distance was much too far for a cast.

There was an obstruction not far away, which he thought would puzzle her, and his time would then come.

There was a crevice in the ground, a deep gully with almost perpendicular sides, and a dozen feet or more in width, which might have been avoided by making a circuit of a few hundred yards; and Daisy had not forgotten it.

The mustang was better even than his reputation, and his mistress knew that he could cover it almost in the length of his stride when at full speed.

She straightened herself a little in the saddle, gripped the reins a trifle tighter, and at the proper moment touched the animal lightly with the whip.

He went over like a bird, never altering the steady, even flight; but Skippers swung his horse to the left, and followed his companion, who had already changed his course. Neither of them cared to risk the leap without a greater necessity than there was in sight.

"Say ther word, Skippers, an' I'll pull up an' down her critter with my Winchester. She'll play us fur fools tell we git away from ther boys an' then take ther back track. That hoss hez ther heels ov ary thing in ther county."

"Hold hard on that till I give the word. We'll have her before she knows it. I'll rope the horse when we get near enough. Tom has a link or two in him he hasn't showed yet."

"You're boss, but it's blame fool play."

"It may save our necks some day, all the same. Spread out, to be ready for her if she turns; and mind, if you have the chance, down her easy."

Daisy was slackening her pace somewhat, and again the pair forged nearer. Unless she was playing with them the end could not be far off.

And there was danger ahead, whether she thought of it or not.

In front stretched the stiff, four wire fence; and though there was a gate not far from the spot where she would strike it, there was no time to dismount and open it. Skippers felt like giving a view halloo.

Then, he frowned, and dug the spurs into his horse's sides. He was hard, and wicked, and cruel, but he cared to do this girl no harm. And he saw she was deliberately tucking under her the flowing skirts of her habit.

"By the great white steer! She means to try it. If he trips on that wire she stands a good chance to be cut in two, and he'll trip, sure as death and taxes."

Even Skippers was moved somewhat, and held his breath as he saw the way Daisy squared herself, with her hand held low down, and her eyes fixed straight ahead as she approached the fence at racing speed.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHERE IS MOLLIE?

It was an awkward jump at which Daisy Dale put her mustang.

Not but that it was within his power, well enough; but the trouble was to make him understand it. Perhaps, if he had been a horse unused to the wire, he would have failed.

As it was, he made the least possible motion toward a swerve; and then when he felt the hand of his mistress hold him straight and steady, and heard a little, encouraging shout, he rose fairly, putting all of his strength into the action.

He skimmed over the fence like a bird, with a full six inches or more to spare. While Skippers was reining in his horse to look for a gate, he was slipping away toward the ranch, at a twenty miles-an-hour gait, safe from all pursuit for the present at least.

This time Hard Hank asked no questions, and made no suggestions. He came to a halt, tumbled off his horse, and threw up his Winchester.

It was well for him that he had not closed his ears at the same time. A sharp click came to them, and knowing what it meant, he turned in the direction whence the sound proceeded.

Skippers was looking composedly along the barrel of his revolver, waiting for him to make up his mind.

"I reckon you won't, then," was his quiet remark.

"If you interrupt the procession that way again, I'll let the hammer drop, if it takes Hard Hank along down with it. You hear me?"

"I hear yer, an' if we didn't mebbe need yer rope ag'in, I'd turn ther barr'l your way an' we'd both run our chances. Ther blamed heifer hez beat us, arter all; an' it's along ov your cussed foolishness."

"So she ought to, if she has more sand and knows how to use it. Oh, she is a daisy, and no mistake. Man alive, what you glowering at? She'll beat us to the house, but what of it? Won't we find her when we get there, and won't she have to give in all the same? Now, rustle along, and find that gate. I don't want the boys to have too wide a laugh on us."

A couple of well-braced posts showed where the gate most probably was.

Had it not been for them, it might have been hard to find. The wires had been divided, and the end of the strands composing the gate were tightly wrapped around the post and twisted a couple times around the wires.

It was only because they happened to have nothing at hand with which to cut the fence, that the men took the trouble to open the gate at all.

Although Daisy knew she had shaken off her pursuers, she did not slacken speed. This was the last troublesome spot, and there was no need to nurse strength for a sudden effort. She was in the home run, now, and all that was to be done was to make as good time as possible, and raise the alarm as she reached the house.

After once becoming certain that the run was to be made she had more opportunity to consider what it was best for her to do when she arrived.

On his guard, and fully weaponed, there was little fear but that the colonel could hold his own against an attack by the whole force, if it should be made; but how to warn him, or prevent him from throwing himself into the hands of these men as they came up, was a question.

It was not likely he would be at the house, though he probably was not far away. Perhaps it was best to call his attention to herself if possible, and then warn him as they went along. She shouted as soon as she thought she was within calling distance; and discharged a couple more barrels of her revolver.

The colonel did not make his appearance, for a very good reason; and though Dashing Daisy would have been rejoiced to see him, she felt somewhat relieved. There was little danger now of his being surprised. He must be at some little distance from the house, and she had to turn her thoughts now to holding the fort until he came.

As she tore up to the house she saw Mrs. Martin, the housekeeper, come to the nearest door, and look out in terror. Behind her showed a couple of other faces, belonging to the women who trained as her corps of assistants.

"Quick! Bolt all the doors!"

Daisy shouted her orders as she sprung from her horse, hardly giving him time to stop. Before she was fairly understood she was inside, and slamming the door. If there was no other help near but these frightened women she might not be able to make a long defense, but she would at least check assault, and perhaps be able to hold out until assistance should come.

She was just in time. Scarcely had the outer door been closed when the men came swarming into the yard.

Some of them she believed she knew by sight, while others were utter strangers, but nearly all looked rough and hardened. They were rustlers of the worst type, if they were not all-round outlaws. Having gone thus far they would hardly stop at anything, even to the pillage of the ranch. She strongly suspected that was what they were there for.

"Halt!" Daisy shouted with a revolver in each hand, speaking from a window.

"I give you fair warning that we can use fire-arms, and that the first man who attempts to enter here dies."

Skippers had not come up yet, and Jimmy was at the head of the men in front of the house.

"Jesso, marm! Jesso! But ther man ez picks up Crack-Shot Daisy fur a fool'll be mighty apt ter let her drap ag'in, too quick. An' so, we reckon you won't be shootin' tell yer hears what we want, an' what we're bound ter hev, ef we git a few sculps in ther takin' ov it. Flag ov truce, mum, tell yer hears what's ther orders."

"No such looking men as you are can carry a flag of truce, and I give you all warning that I will fire at any who advances. Get outside of the yard and shout if you have anything to say. I can hear you well enough from there."

"Can't go back'ards, mum, but I'm willin' ter talk frum hyer ef you'll lis'sen."

Daisy made a fair mark as she stood fearlessly defiant at the window, but even such men as these would hesitate before shooting down a girl. There was the crime of it, to start with; and there was the certainty that there would be an avenging after it was once bruited abroad which would follow far closer than any pursuit on account of bald robbery—or even their horrible frolic with the colonel.

"Say your say, then; but advance no further. If any of your gang move while we are talking I'll drill you. You want to keep them well in hand."

"Jesso so, mum. Jesso. We wouldn't hurt a ha'r ov yer head. It's this hyer way. We are thinkin' ov emigratin'. When ther moon rises shouldn't wonder ef we'd be t'other side ov ther Red Sea—which now er-days they call ther Rio Grandy. Sabbe?"

"Go, then, and the luck of the Old Scratch go with you."

"Thankee, mum. Yer does say it spiteful, ez though yer meant it. Still, yer don't seem ter sabbe."

"What is it that you mean? Speak out. I will waste no time with your nonsense."

She was willing to waste a great deal of time provided she could keep them from moving on the works. Time was what she was playing for.

"We wants ter sp'ile ther 'Gipshuns, ov course; an' onder sich circumstances ther 'Gipshuns orter be willin'. Jesso."

"You will have to show a few miracles before that time comes; and so far the miracles, if there are any, seem to be the other way."

A cry from Mrs. Martin interrupted Daisy, who was too cool to turn her head; but at once stopped speaking to listen. Nor did she hear Jesso Jimmy's response.

The housekeeper was wringing her hands in dismay.

"Mollie! Where is Mollie? Oh, she is out there somewhere with those wretches!"

"Let her be there. They will scarcely harm her!"

"Oh, but there she is now, and that man will ride her down. Shoot! Kill him quick, before he reaches her!"

Mrs. Martin continued to wring her hands, and if she had held a gun she would probably have been putting the life of the child into more danger than ever, though, to tell

the truth, her positionward, but she had not enviable.

her young friend, and a Mrs. Martin had apparently scrambled up to a shortly after the colonel.

second wife, and Mollie, wher, with eyes all the more than a babe, came with strangers, who

When Mrs. Dale made her exit, the-irls turn-keeper remained, and by this time Mollie had come to be regarded quite as one of the family, though the housekeeper saw to it 'y that she was not intrusive, and only made her appearance when she was required to be petted, or scolded, as the case might be!

As the little girl was now wise enough to look after her own safety, and keep out of average dangers, she had rather a roving commission to forge around in the neighborhood of the ranch, and no one seemed to worry about her till meal time came.

No one had missed her this morning, and there is no telling where she had been, but now, she came running towards the house, while right in her wake, though still at a little distance, came Skippers and Hard Hank.

The two, after the balk at the fence, had a little more conversation than that detailed, and thereby wasted some time.

After that they had not followed the most direct route, but had branched off into the trail again, and had seen something which made them come thundering down in savage earnest.

Cool though she might be in all dangers to herself, Daisy could not help a little cry of nervous warning, though she knew it could not reach the ears for which it was intended. If the child would only step out from the trail—it was too late for that. The horses were upon her, and then, with a childish scream, Mollie started, tripped and fell.

CHAPTER IX.

WHERE IS MOLLIE?

THERE is a difference in horses, just as there are differences in men.

It is never safe to risk the chance of their not stepping on a man who is down. That will be pretty much as it happens. Some steeds will get out of the way of a sucking pig, and some will amble along unconcernedly over a bicycle and its rider, apparently unconscious of the wreck left behind.

When the mustang swerved a trifle it was not of its own thought, but because Skippers willed so.

And, then, just as he passed the child, the rustler bent low in the saddle, let his hand skim along the ground for an instant, and with a sudden heave tossed the child up in front of him and dashed on, never slackening his speed.

"You're too late to sack the ranch without a fight for it!"

Those were his words as he dashed up, and as he spoke he pointed.

The outfit had been so busy with what was in front that it had failed to watch for what might be coming from behind. The colonel had been joined by a couple cowboys of the Double O, and the five riders were sweeping toward the ranch. Billy Bird was coming with them, too, in front of one of the cowboys, but he was so insignificant in size that he did not count.

"Jesso; an' ther kunnels with 'em. Reckon we better wind 'em up afore this part ov ther picnic goes any furdur."

Jimmy was as cool as ever when he looked over his shoulder, and saw what was coming.

"It's too late, I tell you, to sack the ranch if we want to finish the rest of the job; and I doubt if we find anything there to pay for the danger. I've got what we want most here, and you know the plans. Best to divide at once, and make hay while the sun shines. Cripple what you can of the outfit; but play to hold them back if you can't kill at long range."

DAISY'S DESPERATE Mollie as he spoke, and DASHING DAISY rode aloof, desirous of disputing his not paying much attention to Hank, throwing his around her. She was the shoulder, took steady aim. gence her brother had in his other charm," he muttered. The colonel had pulled the trigger the and had reeled in his saddle, fell backward, were not dropped to the ground.

thing Hank did not wait to see the result of his of his shot. He had too much confidence in the accuracy of his aim.

Skippers led the way, and he followed, with several others joining in, while the rest, headed by Jesso Jimmy, charged directly toward the little group huddled around the fallen colonel.

The distance was too great for pistol practice, and they were too prudent to throw away lead, bluffing at long range.

They presented a bold front, however. Dismounting between the rustlers and Dale, they used their horses as a shield, and quietly waited for Jimmy to bring his forces within striking distance. It might not be the safest way to meet the charge, but it had to be that way, or leave the colonel.

Jesso Jimmy saw the movement with a grin.

"Sweep around clost ez yer feels like, an' give 'em a volley. Arter that, split fur ther cattle. Thar ortn't ter be many left ter fol-ler."

"But, Jimmy, thar's a woman thar!"

One of the rustlers had seen lone as she dismounted, and recognized her as of the gentler sex.

"Woman, blazes! Whar do yer 'xpect ter shoot to? Ef a man hits her I'll down him myself. Jesso. I tho'rt you 'uns all war picked bec'ase yer knowed how ter sling lead. Better git a popgun, an' practice on a barn door."

The man addressed shrugged his shoulders. The caution would hardly add to the style of his shooting.

He knew he could place his bullets as accurately as the next man under decent conditions; but this shooting from the back of a moving horse had its chances. When four or five persons were bunched together, if the horse changed foot even, as he was pulling trigger, there was a chance the ball would go a trifle wild.

The charge went on, however, each man with a pistol in his hand. If it did nothing else it effectually masked the movement of Skippers, who was leading off in an entirely different direction.

At what seemed the right distance Jimmy raised his hand; and every other weaponed hand raised at the same time. Scarcely dwelling a second for aim they sent a rattling fire from all along the line.

The answering shots were almost simultaneous; and it was a surprise when the rustlers, instead of dashing in to complete their work, suddenly veered off and darted away over the plain. At first it was hard to decide whether it was a retreat or a trap.

But it was a bigger surprise to Jimmy, looking back, to see Colonel Dale shaking his fist after him with wonderful strength for a man whom he had believed to be dead.

If the colonel had even fired a shot by the way of defiance it might have brought a return charge, and a battle to the death.

He staggered back, however, as Jimmy looked, and was caught in the arms of a cowboy, himself wounded.

"Jesso. One wounded man are wu'th two dead 'uns now. Speshully ef ther wounded one are Dale. It'll take all ther lot ter look out fur him, an' they won't keer w'ich way ther cattle goes, er whar Skippers are skootin'."

The cattle had already obtained a long start, and they had not ceased going.

They were if anything more wildly excited than when Billy Bird cut away from the number the maverick on whom was lashed the master of the Double O.

Scarcely had the four started for the ranch when several men appeared following the herd, and with voice and whip urged them in the direction they were already headed. They had not at all been watching to learn the fate of the colonel, and actually neither knew nor cared anything about it.

They were attending strictly to their own business, which was the stampede of the herd; and they would have been on the carpet sooner had it not been that they were delayed, disposing, as they believed they had done, of the cowboys of the Double O who had been in the neighborhood of the cattle.

They were not even aware of the way they had been aided. Had it not been for the presence of Stewart Webb and his daughter, at the head of the stampede, a little before, they would have had a fair chance to follow the herd straight into Boot Jack. They had made a mistake about the time it would take them to get there themselves.

It is true, they did not see the colonel and his allies as they set out for the ranch, and a little later they heard the shooting and the shouting, borne faintly to them, but to all that they paid no attention. It was their task to handle the cattle, and the "cubs" were noted hands to stick to their work and let nothing else trouble them.

They had gone some miles before they saw a body of horsemen coming behind them at a hard gallop.

The distance was too great, at first, to be absolutely certain, but the oldest of the "cubs" was willing to take some risks on the correctness of his guess.

"I reckon they've got away with all ther luggage they want ter kerry an' are comin' ter j'ine in ther good work."

"Ef it ain't them?"

"Take to ther brush an' let 'em go on after ther cattle."

"No shootin', eh?"

"Nary, unless ther fool cusses tries ter crowd. Ef they do I guess ther cubs know how to make the'r teeth meet."

When Jesso Jimmy, and his men, swept up, they got a sharp look but no questions from the trio; and now that the number of the drivers was increased, herd and all forged ahead at a faster pace than ever, with their noses pointed for the river twenty miles away.

They had made their calculations well, and believed they could cross long enough before any pursuit could be organized to follow and reach them.

The fall of the colonel was really the important factor in the delay.

Had he remained in the saddle he would have followed without an instant's hesitation, though the rustler force outnumbered his two or three to one.

Yet, after all, Dale was not seriously hurt, and though his second fall was something like a fainting spell, it was one brought on largely by excitement and subsequent collapse. The cowboy who held him had lost more blood, though he was the stronger on his pins.

When Daisy tore up on her mustang, which she had caught as it wandered near the house, her father was again recovering from unconsciousness, and as he staggered up to meet her she was relieved of the agonizing fear which had been possessing her.

For that reason she did not exhibit any of its symptoms, nor did she make any wild demonstration. By the time she had pressed her father's hand, and given a glance around, she was her own laughing, reckless little self again.

For the moment she had forgotten about Mollie.

"All safe that goes on two feet; but I wouldn't like to vouch for what goes on four. And there is a gang of the rustlers,

Better wait till you can call in a little army. I held them at bay at the house; but it was through grace, and not through fear."

"Yes, yes. We must refit first, and have aid. A couple of us are touched, but not deep enough to hurt. Your Uncle Webb, Daisy, and his daughter, I suppose. You can get better acquainted later on. Now, for the ranch!"

He spoke more bitterly than he knew, but it was not noticed.

They lingered no longer; and when, in a few moments, they approached the house, Mrs. Martin came rushing toward them.

"Mollie! Where is she? Did you get her? Oh, do not tell me she is dead," was followed by the cold, steady voice of Stewart Webb.

"Who is this Mollie, and what have you done with her? If harm has happened to her, by the heavens above us, I'll hold you personally responsible!"

CHAPTER X.

ON THE TRAIL.

"MAN alive, what bites you now?" asked the colonel.

"I know as little about it as you do yourself. Mollie is Mrs. Martin's daughter, and I suppose the little witch has crawled out of sight somewhere, to keep out of the way. Nothing can happen to her. She is generally altogether too much under foot."

"No, no!" exclaimed Daisy, at last remembering.

"She might have been ridden down, but one of the gang caught her up without harm. If he went to that trouble he certainly would have seen that nothing worse happened to her. She must be somewhere about. They would have no use for her."

"Best hunt for her, then. Strange things happen sometimes, and they may even take her away as a hostage."

Stewart Webb still spoke with bitter calmness, and Mrs. Martin at least appeared to understand the weight of his words.

"Yes, yes. They took her with them. I am sure of it. That young man still had her in front of him when he turned away. She is gone, and how shall I give an account for her!"

Mrs. Martin was fat, and usually full of good humor. The colonel hardly knew her as she stood there, wringing her hands; but he took little time to consider the change in the expression of her middle-aged face.

He had learned to think a great deal of the little girl, and what he heard truly shocked him.

"Something may have happened to her after all. They did not have her with them when they rode down on us. What then had become of her?"

"Ef a small boy kin chip whar betters are a-chinnin', I should remark thet she didn't come our way at all. They jest put it to yer ef yer wants ter find ther gal, er git ther cattle. They ain't on ther same trail, an' you can't have 'em both."

"What do you mean?"

Stewart Webb had seen nothing of this, but he did not despise small things.

"You folks might 'a' bed ther same chance but yer didn't look fur enough. Thar war a couple drapped off, an' ef you'll take a squint I wouldn't wonder ef yer could find ther trail, leadin' west. How soon they'll drap her I I can't say, bein' ez I don't jest know what they want ov her, but thar's whar she went, an' I s'pect she's a-goin' yit."

"I'll trust the young scallywag's judgment in such a matter, every time, if I was going to horsewhip him the last time we parted. That is just the game they have played, and it means good by to a thousand head of cattle. Of course we'll follow the girl. If they took her twenty miles and then dropped her, the little thing might and

would die if no one came to her rescue. If the boys were only back! A day sooner and we would give them a hustle all along the line."

The colonel spoke promptly, and his words seemed to satisfy Stewart Webb, who bent his head and remained silent.

"Ef ther small boy kin reemark ag'in he'd say that it won't take ther hull outfit ter buck ag'in' that lay-out. Me, an' a couple ez could shoot plumb-center might be ernuf fur it; a couple might roust around an' work up ther neighbors—ef thar are any in this ding-blasted kentry; an' ther rest kin pile on after ther cattle, an' see whar they goes to. An' come ter think, ez thet seems ter be ther biggest heft ov ther job, it looks ez though I orter take it meself. Dunno ez thar's ary one hyer ter be trusted with it 'cept ther kunnel, an' he'll want ter be goin' ther other way."

The colonel smiled in spite of himself.

"Modesty will never kill you, as I remarked before."

"Jess so, ez Jimmy sez. An' I'd sooner die than hev too much ov it. I don't count on starvin' this year, an' afore we git through with this racket thar'll be some 'uns that won't starve next. So long. When you fellers git a move on you'll find me som'eres along ther trail."

The boy stuck his hat on the back of his head, with the broad brim flaring upward, and stalked out of the room. He had no intention of losing more valuable time; and he guessed his action would bring the rest to the same opinion.

In that he was not far wrong, though he was already well out of sight of the ranch when the two parties from the house were ready for the trail.

Then the two cowboys followed in his wake, while the rest of the party were galloping along in the direction taken by Skippers and his companions.

The colonel would have been glad to leave the young ladies behind, but they would not hear of it.

"If we find Mollie we can bring her back, while you men can follow on after the ruffians. Their trail will run into that of the cattle-lifters at last; and then there may be some things we won't want to see. Meantime, Ione and I will be getting acquainted. Strange, I never knew of her before."

At that the colonel drew himself up stiffly and rode on. "The two young ladies had taken a fancy to each other on sight, and though neither of the gentlemen offered any objection they were evidently not charmed."

Of the conversation by the wayside, and the journey across the country it is not necessary to speak. The trail they followed was not a plain one, nor was it always in sight.

Fortunately, the colonel knew the country well for a dozen miles or more, and could almost say beforehand what particular course the fugitives must take.

At times there was not even a hoof-mark in sight; yet as often was the right course found.

The country began to grow rougher, the trail less and less easy to follow or to find. At one place the colonel came fairly to a fault.

"You, Daisy, and your friend will remain here," he said.

"Webb and I will give a cast in yonder direction. It looks possible they may have doubled back on us, and gone north. It begins to look as though there was more in this than I understood at the outset."

Daisy laughed shortly.

"You should have Billy Webb here to expound. He, at least, would be equal to the occasion."

"Might have a worse head for a suggestion. The bantam rustler crows loud for his size, but he has game and science to back

him up. He could 'do the work with less risk and more comfort than the best of us."

The colonel spoke shortly, but perhaps not more than he really meant. He knew a good deal about the fresh young lad, and the most of it was to his credit.

Stewart Webb watched Dale coldly; and if the colonel had noted his glances he might have thought that his late wife's brother did not altogether trust him.

The two rode away together without leaving further instructions. It was not likely that they would go far, or be gone long.

The two girls waited some time. The men had vanished from their sight around an elevation at no great distance. Daisy watched the crown of it, expecting them to make their appearance there. It would be a good place from which to take a view of the surrounding country.

Ione said nothing. She knew better that the feeling between the men was not apt to be altogether cordial, and was in dread of something which might disturb the present pacific relations. She was busy with certain unpleasant thoughts of her own when Daisy spoke.

"They must have gone further than they thought. We may as well ride on to the top of the hill, and see what is to be seen. It may be the chase is in sight."

The top of the elevation was reached without much trouble, only to find there was another like to it beyond, with a pass between. But of the two men there was not a sight.

They listened intently, but heard no sound. For the first time the loneliness began to be oppressive.

Neither of them were frightened, but the position was something of a puzzle; and by no means a pleasing one.

"What next?" asked Ione, staring dubiously around.

"Are we to wait here until relieved from duty? Night is not so very far off, and I confess I would like to be better guarded if we are to spend it in the open. If father once gets the game in sight he will never stop until he strikes."

Daisy was feeling uncomfortable herself.

The men might return from a direction almost opposite to that in which they went; and to attempt to follow would be folly. Yet there was truth in the suggestion of Ione; and it might be that if they remained they would be destined to pass the night upon the plain alone.

There was time enough to reach the ranch again if they started at once, but it was too soon to leave the spot, since all hope of the return of the colonel and Stewart Webb had not been given up.

"Nothing to do, I suspect, but to go back where we were stationed and trust to luck. We will hardly be forgotten; and if the worst comes to the worst my mustang could take us home were the night ever so dark. We enlisted for the war, and will have to take its chances."

Resigned as they were to waiting, the moments dragged heavily when they had returned to the spot where their fathers had left them, and it was without alarm, but rather with thankfulness they heard at last the regular though distant gallop of horses.

CHAPTER XI.

SEVERAL SURPRISES.

"Quick, Ione, mount and away!"

It was Daisy that discovered that the men galloping toward them were not only strangers, but apparently of the kind they wanted to avoid.

She swung herself into the saddle as she spoke, for the two had been standing with their bridles over their arms, allowing their horses to crop at the scanty herbage.

Ione was not awkward, but she had not had the practice of her young friend, and a minute was lost while she scrambled up to a seat.

But Daisy waited for her, with eyes all the time fixed on the advancing strangers, who were within pistol-shot when the girls turned their horses' heads and shot away in a swift retreat.

A voice calling upon them to halt only caused them quietly to call upon their mustangs for further efforts, though they gave no outward show of serious alarm. Then, a word or two reaching them told that they were in for a race.

Unfortunately, the new-comers had cut them off from the direct line of retreat, and they were compelled to plunge blindly forward, trusting to luck to befriend them, and bring them again into the trail.

"Mexicans, both," said Daisy leaning forward, toward her friend.

"And viler faces I never saw. If I was certain of my shooting under such circumstances, I would think it a safe thing to try my hand on them. Be ready with your revolver, but keep it out of sight. We may have to give them a surprise yet."

"It is ready. Heaven save me from having to use it."

"Heaven help you to do good work when you begin. Recollect there is no foolishness about such things, here. If you ever draw trigger, do it to slay, for after that it will be life or death."

"I understand, but the thought of it makes me shiver. Are they gaining?"

"Not a foot; and Selim is going well within himself. I can let out a link or two at any time, but I want to be certain of your horse. He looks like a good one, but we have both taken something out of our mounts, and it may be a chase for miles if we would escape."

The two had shaken their wits together, and by this time were cool as the coolest. A pistol ball which thirred along in their wake, and dropped just behind, hardly gave them an extra thrill. From the very first they had understood they were in danger, and must make the best possible of the situation.

Another shot came, and an instant later Ione gave a little cry of dismay, though so low it barely reached her companion's ears.

"What is it, dear?"

Yet Daisy saw for herself, since the horse of Ione forged furiously ahead, though going on three legs. The bullet had hit him hand, and it was not likely he could keep up this furious pace much longer.

Selim answered to a call from his mistress, and with a wonderful burst of speed shot up to the side of the other mustang again.

"He is going to pieces," called Ione, who was by no means a novice.

"Hold him together a little longer. There is no chance for us here, but if we can reach that pile of rock ahead we may have a little advantage, at least, in the fight that is bound to come."

"No use. Ride on and save yourself. You can send me help, perhaps. No need for us both to be lost."

The mustang had shot its bolt, and was already beginning to fall back. There was no telling how soon it would totally collapse.

"I will not leave you; but make one effort. Selim will carry double for that distance, and if I can get you on without halting we will yet make it. We have been going two yards to their one. If we could keep it up, they would draw off of their own accord."

Looking back, Daisy had seen, as she thought, symptoms of hesitation on the part of their pursuers.

As the horse of Ione began to lag, they came on again.

It was a desperate chance, but one the taking of which could hardly make matters worse. Disentangling her foot from the

stirrup, Ione leaned far over until she could place her hand on Selim's back.

Then, just in time, she sprang.

A cry of triumph from behind told that the pursuers were nearer, and certain. With the double weight on his back, Selim could not be expected to hold his own long, and it did not seem worth while, even, to chance another shot, or to call for any extra effort from their mustangs.

The race ended sooner than they supposed it would.

With a sudden turn of the wrist Daisy wheeled, and darted between two howlers upon which she had been keeping her eyes. Then, she halted, and leaped to the ground, Ione following.

When the Mexicans barely had time to understand the fugitives were turning at bay, two pistol barrels were looking at them from over the tops of the howlers.

"Halt!" shouted Daisy.

"Whether friend or foe come no nearer. A pace or two further and you will be in range. Once there and I have a drop on you."

The two men pulled up, and one of them dropped from the saddle and threw himself at full length on the ground. They were not frightened by the warning, but they intended to be cautious. The fellow had a scheme in view.

He had crawled half a dozen yards when he suddenly sprang to his feet, and ran back toward his mustang, while his companion turned and cantered away. The girls followed them with their eyes, uncertain how to take their deliverance until they saw a single horseman drifting past them.

He touched his hat carelessly to them as he went by, and his other hand whirled a coiled lasso. A bit of business seemed to have fallen in his way, and he was taking it pleasantly.

He looked from the Mexican to the mustang on which the fellow had just laid a hand; and then flung the rope.

The noose caught the mustang; and at once the man dodged behind it and made off at full speed on foot.

"Why, it's Ed!" exclaimed Daisy.

"Ed! Oh, Ed!"

She sprang up upon the rock, and as the young man half turned in his saddle to look back at her she beckoned imperiously.

The fugitive gave no sign of turning; and if their actions went for anything they were not likely to have business in that immediate neighborhood for some time to come. Ed drew his horse, wheeled, and rode gayly back to the young ladies; his capture coming aimably with him. The mustang had been roped before.

"In the name of saints, synagogues and sinners! What are you doing here?"

No wonder he was surprised since he had that morning left his sister miles away; but the surprise was mutual. With his appearance all thought of danger was gone, and Daisy was ready both to give and receive an explanation.

The Mexicans halted at a distance and looked backward, as though somewhat ashamed of their flight, and with half an idea of coming back, but when they saw the young man coolly unfastening the Winchester which was strapped behind him they moved on once more, apparently giving up the game. The one rode steadily, while the other plodded along on foot.

Ed gave a glance around, to make doubly sure there was no other danger near, and to note what chances there were that the men could execute a flank movement, and in some way take them unawares.

When he was satisfied the danger was slight, and there was plenty of time at his disposal, he at last turned to answer the questions of his sister, who, meantime, had been catching Selim. The animal taken from the Mexican would serve to mount her friend.

His own query had passed unnoticed, for naturally the feminine curiosity had first to be gratified.

His explanations were few, and quickly made.

Shortly after leaving Daisy he had met a cowboy riding as a courier to warn several of the ranches that the rustlers and cattle-thieves were on the war-path, and had made a raid on a range which lay still further to the west than the Three Link.

While they were looking for trouble from the outlying herdmen the steer-lifters had got in their work, and were running off a couple thousand head.

It was too late, then, to reach the Three Link range, and join the men from there, so he turned and rode for a point where he thought he might intercept them. That brought him, providentially, where he seemed to be needed most of all.

"And this young lady—introduce me, please," he added, looking at Ione.

He bowed low as he heard the name, and a queer look crept into the face which was well shaded by his sombrero.

He listened to the explanations of his sister in turn with a dubious air, and spoke with hesitation and yet with emphasis:

"I am afraid the old gentleman—I am afraid they both have got into a mess. Those cut-throats came by the trail father took?"

"So far as we could tell."

"Then, I suspect there has been trouble. He never would have left you all this time alone. It is ten to one they have roped him in, and are holding him for a hostage."

"It is worse than that. You know they could never take him alive. Oh, if they have come together he must be dead."

"You are mistaken there. It is two to one no harm has been done. As for ourselves, I suspect the sooner we get out of this the better."

"And leave father behind?"

"Yes. He will take care of himself; I tell you. Our Mexican friends appear to be coming back, and they bring more of the same kind with them."

He turned slightly, and the girls obeying a gesture to precede him they loped steadily away, this time straight to the south.

Night was coming on, but it had no particular terror since the moon was at its full. They were more concerned lest their horses should fail them. Yet they kept up their speed for some time; and then, without warning, Selim shied at a dark object which lay almost in his path.

"It is a man!" exclaimed Daisy, her hand tightening on the rein.

"He is dead! Can it be father?"

In an instant Edward was off and kneeling by the prostrate form, a lighted match held to his face. No Colonel Dale was this—the face was years younger—and Daisy, leaning low in her saddle, recognized it with strange readiness.

"It is the young man who stole Mollie. I know him. We are on the right track at last. Which way have they gone?"

"It will not be hard to find the trail; but we must do something for this poor fellow, thief or not. He don't seem to be altogether dead."

CHAPTER XII.

DUTCH JOHN'S.

It really seemed to be more by luck than judgment that Daisy recognized the face which shone out under the flare of the match.

But there was something familiar about it; and time and circumstance supplied the rest.

She remembered, too, that there had been something kindly, though indefinable, in the manner in which he had swung the child out of danger.

Whatever else might have been his object she could not believe he would ever willingly

allow harm come to the little one he had taken the trouble once to rescue.

She dismounted herself, and as Ione had already slipped to the ground the three were gathered around the prostrate form. Perhaps, their chief and first aim was to minister to an injured man; but beyond that there was the chance of learning something in regard to the two missing fathers, who had followed off on the trail of this very person.

Young Dale was something of an amateur surgeon, but he had little at hand in the way of appliances, and would have been puzzled to know what to do had the case been a serious one.

There was more life than he had suspected upon his first hasty examination, and the three met with a surprise.

Suddenly, from between their very feet, the figure bounded up, flung itself on one of their horses, and without a word dashed away.

For once, Ed Dale was caught completely off his guard, and Skippers was already at long range when his pistol hand went up.

Daisy caught at his wrist.

"It is the fortune of war. We have no need of him as a prisoner; we could not kill him; and as for the horse he had taken, it was not ours. Ione and I will have to ride double. That is all."

"Yes, but the scheme ought to be to follow him without delay; and with two on Selim we could catch up about as soon by turning around and going the other way. Confound it! He knows where he is going well enough, and we ought to be striking for the same place. One way or another there will be work for us there."

"Go on, then, and leave us to follow. I guess that Crack-Shot Daisy is equal for the occasion."

"Scarcely," was the dry answer.

"We will make what time we can, and then trust to luck for the rest."

They mounted and pushed on after Skippers, who had disappeared in the very direction in which they had been going. It looked as though the colonel might have overtaken him, and wrenched Mollie away, but all was uncertain.

There was nothing now to do but to keep going.

Several hours later, when they were all more or less tired with wandering, but the horses most of all, they caught sight of a distant light.

The country around them had seemed a solitude which it was impossible to break; and signs of habitation were unexpected. Ed drew in his horse, and Daisy did the same as she heard him mutter:

"We are out of our course by a dozen miles."

"But, do you know where we are?"

"Not the place I would care to bring you; and yet, it is one where we well might find word of the young gentleman who played us such a pretty trick. If I am not mistaken, it is a spot to which such gentry drift when they need rest and concealment."

"Not Dutch John's?"

Daisy was a stranger to the country, but she had heard certain stories which were afloat, and guessed at the location.

"Yes, Dutch John's. The wonder is, no one thought of coming here in the first place."

"But, it was Mollie we wanted; and who would suppose that they would bring the child here? I cannot even yet think she was purposely abducted, though, on afterthought, they may have decided to keep her with them as a shield, or hostage, or something of that kind."

"Possible enough, but what we want to find out is whether she is here, anyhow."

"In a den of that kind! You should have half a dozen men behind you to go there, asking questions."

"It might be better. They wouldn't be."

as apt to get themselves in a tangle before they knew it, though I am not sure I would be any better off. I would have to be looking out for the rest, and this way I have only myself to care for. I'll leave you two here and spy out the land."

"No. You shall not go alone. We must know what happens, though the risk is a mad one. I believe father has Mollie safe enough, even now, and is hunting for us. How else can you account for the man we found?"

"He may have struck your friends, the Mexicans. His mustangs may have given him a cropper and his pards been in too great a hurry to wait for him. A dozen things which we wouldn't think of. For your sakes I will be cautious, but you must keep away, and remain where I can find you if I have occasion to depart in a hurry."

Ed was apt to be positive with this sister of his, and to expect obedience. They drew nearer to the house, and finally, at a convenient distance, he called another halt.

"I'll leave you two girls with the horses. I don't want to be bothered with one of them; and it will be just as well in case anything happens. If the other fellows come first, turn your faces northeast—that way—and cut and run for it. I'll come later on. Just let your mustangs go, and see that they go fast enough. So long."

He stole carelessly away, and the young ladies watched dubiously his shadowy figure as it became more and more indistinct.

"Is it such a bad place?" asked Lone, somewhat breathlessly.

"The worst along the border. Dutch John, who keeps it, fears neither men nor angels, and is so deadly quiet and respectable looking in his Dutchness that somehow they have never been able to give a reason why he and his place should not be wiped out, root and branch. Those who go there never tell."

"Then our place is with your brother. He must not know we are there until he needs us, and when he does he will find us ready."

"You are right. We will hopple our mustangs, and follow. They say there is a good deal of moral influence in the presence of a woman."

"Especially if she carries a six-shooter, and knows how to use it."

A nervous little laugh was the answer to this, and the two together went on in the wake of Ed Dale.

He had something of a start, but advanced more cautiously. By the time the house was reached they had almost overtaken him. Had he looked behind he must have seen them.

He was more interested in what was in front.

Daisy had almost sufficiently described the reputation of the place.

It was a tavern, located where one would have supposed there was but little need for one, yet it did a thriving business, being patronized principally by men who at least had little respect for the law, if they were not at direct variance with it.

Cattle-thieves, outlaws, refugees from justice, men fleeing across the border to escape the avenger—these knew of the place, and patronized it on occasion.

Men gambled there, fought, and hid, and used it as a base of operations. It was not a good house for one honest man to enter, but when a dozen came at a time they found nothing out of the way but its reputation. Dutch John was quiet, respectful, and in full sympathy with law and its representative, while, if any one else was to be found, it was generally some honest looking cowboy, or quiet "greaser," against whom there was no known complaint.

This was the house which Dale approached, wondering what he would find.

Considering its location, Dutch John's was quite a well-built house. Its owner had taste after its kind, and his business there had prospered. Quite comfortable were his quarters, and had the place not borne such an unsavory reputation the two girls who halted and looked upward at the light which was streaming through the nearby window would have been only too glad to seek shelter there for the night.

But an instant before they had seen Ed Dale enter, and they did not expect their suspense would last long.

Daisy crouched down so as not to be seen in the glare from the window; but Lone could not wait. She stole up on a little porch which ran along the house, and peered in through the window.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHEN ROGUES FALL OUT.

THE bar-room of Dutch John's was of good size, and comfortably furnished. Its appearance was a surprise to the stranger who entered it for the first time, though the outside of the house might have given a hint of what might be expected.

At one end was the bar, at which drinks could be obtained after the regulation fashion, and in front of this was a clear space for the accommodation of loungers.

Against the wall were benches which might give rest for the weary, and had served for beds on more than one occasion when an overplus of patrons caused a corner in the regulation article.

At the other end were chairs, and several tables, at which men might sit and drink or gamble to their heart's content, so long as their money lasted.

At one of these tables two men were seated.

Each held a tumbler in his hand, and between them stood a black bottle, containing some of John's best.

One of these was Hard Hank. The other was a man who did not look altogether in place, though his face wore fully as vicious an appearance as that of his companion.

And on the floor, at the feet of Hank, was a little bundle coiled up, which had something of the outlines of a child. In fact, it was little Mollie.

The two men conversed in low tones, apparently unmindful of several who were in the other part of the room, and who seemed to be paying as little attention to them.

"You're trying to drive too hard a bargain," said the stranger.

"There's money in the girl, and that's a fact, but nothing like what you are asking down. It may take a year to get it out. May have to prove she's dead first, you understand. And there's no end of risk in it, all 'round."

"That's your risk, Jack Birch, not mine. Yer said five hundred apiece fur ther three ov us ef we got her, an' give ther proof ov who she war; an' I reckon ef I fill ther bill it are ez good ez if thar war a dozen on ther roll. Fifteen hundred takes ther trick, an' nothin' shorter."

"That might go, if I was sure of the other two. But, when I got done settling with you, what's to hinder them from putting in their little account? And I haven't seen that proof yet, of whether this is the child I wanted or not. I don't know her from a side of sole leather, and I'm not sure you do, either."

"That war Nippers's part ov ther game, an' I reckon he wouldn't make no mistake about it. No coin, no girl, an' that's all thar are ter say about it."

"That may be all so, but Nippers, as you call him, has got to speak for himself. Where is he now?"

"Where a pard are bound ter go to ez puts on frills 'round me. Over ther range,

ef yer must know it. He drawefy the twice afore, ter-day; this last timaround, too often. I got ther drop, an' le fear but

Hard Hank spoke carelessly, up fit to knew him of old, and he did y be hers, place himself in his power by till never he thought was the truth.

g ladies, His words, whether they were ou have not, made no great impression.

re out "Better call him back, then, and se the produce the documents. I'm not gill be too deep on your say so."

can A hearty oath dropped from the m a Hank.

"What's biting you now? Don't let sol truth griad you. I'll give you the five hundred for the girl, and as much more to see us out of this delectable region. When Nippers comes with what I want, I'll give his third of the pile."

"But dog-gone it, he's lying out thar on ther prairie, an' he's got ther papers with him. D'unno whar he got 'em, but he had 'em. An' I forgot ter corral 'em."

"Bad thing to forget—in your business."

Hank stared coldly at his *vis a vis*.

"Don't yer furgit thet I hev ther gal."

"That's all right; but supposing I don't take her off your hands? What you going to do with her?"

"Kill her, p'rhaps."

"And that would be worth just as much to me as to have the youngster, and some day pay myself to have the job done. Be reasonable, Hank. It will pay. I have the long end of the string."

It would have been hard for a listener to tell whether the two were angry. It was a mere matter of business between them, and so far it was not evident that either was trying to take what could be considered an unfair advantage of the other.

"Ef that's yer game, I'd 'a' better stuck with ther cattle, an' let Nippers dicker with you. Curse ther kid! It's a chance she'll hang ther batch ov us, yit."

He gave the little bundle a push with his foot, and the child sprang up. Had he not deftly caught her by the arm she would have dashed away.

"No, yer don't!" he muttered; but at the same time the hand of Ed Dale dropped quietly on his shoulder.

"Sorry to trouble you, my friend, but I'll take charge of the young lady till I can take her home to her mother."

Young Dale had come quietly into the room, and moved so silently that Hard Hank had no notice of his coming.

Jack Birch, as cool as the coolest, was watching him, but he gave no sign. He had been staring over Hard Hank's shoulder all the time, and there had been no change of countenance to tell that he saw what was coming.

Dutch John had seen, however, and was moving up, supported by a rough-looking fellow who belonged in the house, and who was generally considered to be his son.

So far, all was deadly quiet, but to Lone, watching through the window, there seemed to be all the elements of a coming tragedy, and she beckoned to Daisy. There were still several men in the rear of the room who had apparently paid no attention to what was on the carpet, but they would be apt to side with Dutch John and his other patrons.

Hard Hank was as cool as the rest.

At touch and voice he quietly upturned the glass in his hand, holding it with the bottom to his palm, ready to be used as an effective weapon, if there was no time to draw the revolver which swung at his waist, and which, without otherwise moving, he could not reach and raise since his side rested against the edge of the table.

Then he looked up over his shoulder to see who it was who spoke.

"You will?" he sneered. "Mebbe it wouldn't 'a' bin a bad thing ef yer mammy hed sent a guardeen 'long with you, when she

stirrup. "You out. Looks ter me ez though yer place her is a blamed sight more than ther Then, jus' has me."

A cry of "You'd not well be in worse hands, to the pursuers of the fact that she don't belong the double 't be excited. The child was not be expect my father's house, and shall did not see re. Whether you had any hand another sh'uction I know not; but it makes no from their e. This time I have only come for The ra."

it would you're a cub of the old wolf's? Take With wheel spoke without excitement or heat, but, upo he spoke he suddenly wheeled, kicking the chair from under him as he did so, and threw his arms around Dale.

His intention was to pinion both arms of the young ranchman to his side, but he was only partially successful.

Ed's left arm was caught as though in a vise, but his right, by a quick motion, he raised, and as Hard Hank plunged in he struck with the point of his elbow.

It was the most effective way of resistance, since there was no hope of instantly reaching the weapons he had thrust away on entering the room.

The blow was surely delivered, and fell with crushing force full on the upturned face, driving the man back, as his grasp loosened.

As Hank staggered against the table—but for which he would have fallen—Dale, by a sudden motion tossed the child to the rear, and then whipped out a brace of revolvers which had swung concealed behind him.

One of them dropped in line with Hard Hank, while the other covered Jack Birch.

"Run, Mollie!" he shouted. "Get outside, and wait for me there."

CHAPTER XIV.

CRACK-SHOT DAISY'S DROP.

BIRCH had remained if anything the coolest man there, but when Ed Dale turned one barrel in his direction he knew what he was doing.

Jack's hand had stolen silently within his vest, and was already resting on the deringer he carried hidden there. Another slight motion of the arm, a turn of the wrist, and he would have had the young man from the Three Links covered.

The movement did not unnerve him. He continued silently to stare at Ed, and it seemed to be his policy to take no immediate part in the affair unless driven to it. He had an eye to a hereafter, and so far had done nothing here which could not be explained.

He gave no warning, though he saw that a storm had gathered which was about to break. Dutch John and his son had given a signal to the loungers near the bar and they were stealing nearer. It was only that they might join in the rush as the attack was delayed.

But, there was a factor in the game of which none of those within the room was aware.

Daisy had cautiously tested the window, and found that it yielded to her touch.

With a quick movement she threw it up; then her sharp voice was heard:

"Back there, you ruffians! Another step forward and you drop!"

With a face flaming with excitement, she leaned far forward into the room, and turned two revolvers squarely upon Dutch John, while Ione appeared at her shoulder, ready to aid in maintaining the deadlock which Daisy's appearance had produced.

The rush that was coming stopped on the instant, if, indeed, it was ever began. Dutch John looked across into the eyes of Daisy, and decided that she meant shoot, while his allies waited for orders.

Dale was not deceived by the quiet. He knew that, sooner or later, he would have to measure strength with these men, and that

they only waited until the best plan of campaign became apparent. It was for no lack of nerve they were holding their hands.

He shifted swiftly back, and, by the movement, brought Dutch John so far to the front he could follow him with his eyes.

"You girls are there, are you?" he coolly called out. "Better be somewhere else; but that's no matter. Turn your guns, Daisy, on the men at the table, and hold them still. I'll see after the rest."

He had sized the men all up, and Jack Birch was the one he feared most of all. If he had not hesitated to open the ball, he would have sent a bullet in that direction, and so put him out of the game before it went further.

His speech, however, was a ruse. Little Mollie had taken his advice, and dodged out of the room the moment she was at liberty.

He had noticed that she left the door open behind her, and with a bound he took advantage of the fact. Before the crowd was ready to move he stood in the doorway, ready for fight or retreat as the case might seem to warrant.

Had it not been for the presence of the girls he might have followed a different course, but they were bound to be an embarrassment in his retreat, while he did not care to open a fight under their view, willing as they had shown themselves to aid him. He knew better than they what it meant when such men really got down to business at close quarters.

"If you have the kid, take her along and slide out," he said in a low voice. "I'll follow the minute you get started. Go!"

He was careless whether or not his words reached the ears of the men within the room. If they did be intended they should be misleading, and all he hoped was that his orders would be obeyed.

Daisy heard, and believed that her brother understood the situation. She caught Ione's dress, with a simple:

"Come!"

Then both of them fled, dragging the whimpering Mollie between them.

Daisy was certain that Selim would stay where she left him, and had no doubt she would find the other horse alongside of him. She and Ione had no idea of meeting any one on the way, and were entirely off their guard when, suddenly, two men rose up in front of them! Before they could make up their minds for either flight or resistance they were prisoners.

Then, past them, with a shrill hurrah, rode a knot of horsemen, who charged up to the front of Dutch John's after the manner of the men who knew the way.

Their coming was none too soon if they wanted to have a hand in a fray. At that very moment the pistols had begun to crack. One brave man was trying to hold his own against half a dozen.

It was Jack Birch who had broken the deadlock.

Hardly had the girls left the porch when, without a sign of preparation, he gave a great side spring, and bounded through the open window. Ed Dale had delayed his retreat an instant too long.

It was natural for him to cast his glance without, to see what was coming from that direction, and as he did so several shots were fired.

They were all taken without more than a fleeting aim, and though the bullet of Hard Hank plowed through the fleshy part of his shoulder there was no great harm done, and with the report ringing in his ears he sprang at Jack Birch, who, instead of paying any attention to him was bent on following the girls.

He had heard enough to know that little Mollie was with them, and it was Mollie he was after.

So it happened that Dale and Birch were

wound together in a fierce struggle, and Hard Hank and his backers were just rushing out of the house, as the charge of horsemen came pouring up.

"Hands up!" shouted the leader. "Make a movement, you treacherous hound, and we riddle you with bullets!"

CHAPTER XV.

BRONCO BILLY ON THE WAR-PATH.

THE two cowboys who had started in the wake of Bronco Billy, as they supposed, rode a long time without coming in sight of him.

For that there was a very good reason. Billy had not followed the cattle-thieves at all.

He had said nothing of the presence of the Double O herders at Boot Jack, and probably had made the omission on purpose. If he wanted to take control of this campaign the less he said the better. Considering the trying scenes the colonel had just passed through he could not be expected to have a very clear head, and when Billy left him his first idea was to look after the safety of the little girl.

But Bronco Billy was aware that the boys expected to start for the ranch after dinner, and the great question with him was, how soon?

He did waver for a moment when he was fairly out of sight of the house, for the temptation was strong to do his best to overtake the rustlers, and have some "fun" on his own hook.

He battled with it successfully, and turned the nose of his pony toward Boot Jack, with a fervent prayer that he might not have far to go before he met the boys on the way.

When several miles had slipped behind, and he was ready to be hopeless, he saw half a dozen horsemen coming at a gallop, and at once drew in. He was willing to save his mount every rod it was possible, and if they saw him halt as if in doubt, and they were at all enthused with the Boot Jack brand of benzine, it was likely they would come the faster.

He made no mistake in that, for the boys sighted him at a distance, and a couple of them came racing for him, swinging their lariats. There was a bet between them who should rope the youngster first. The others followed at almost as rapid a rate.

"Fair play, pard!" Billy shouted as they came within hearing distance, at the same time holding up his hand with the palm toward them.

"You liss'en to me warble, an' then, ef yer thinks thar's time fur it, I'll give yer a squar' chase, an' bet yer rocks thet me an' my cayeuse kin keep ther rope off fur a hundred yards."

"It's Billy Bird!" shouted one of the men who knew the boy.

"He never chins but what he sez s'uthin'. Give him his show, pard, an' settle with me ef he don't talk wu'th ther money."

And so it happened that Billy told his story, which was received with a yell, and then was off on the trail, a little late in the day, but with half a dozen good men behind him. If his pony stood the racket he had an idea his chance was good to see some elegant "fun."

They asked some questions as they rode along, but Billy was not exact y a mine of information, just then. He told what he had seen, but he could give little explanation. He was better at making a guess at how many rustlers they would be apt to find in the gang, and how much of a start they already had. After that, the cowboys could figure it out better how long it would take to overtake the herd. The cattle could not, and would not, keep up the pace at which they had started, and it seemed likely the raid was made because they thought the Double O Ranch had been so drained of men

that anything like effective pursuit could not be made.

"They figgered on it thet ef a couple ov ther boys follered they'd down 'em on sight, an' ef ther kunnel waited at ther ranch ter raise a crowd they'd be on t'other side ov ther river, safe enough. Betcher we strike 'em right whar ther trail cuts acrost ther one thet leads up ter Dutch Jack's."

So the leader of the cowboys said, and his calculations were not so far wrong.

A stern chase is a long one, at best, and with a start of even an hour it would be well on in the afternoon before they could expect to close in.

It was straight riding, however, and the boys frolicked along as though they were going to a ball; and they were not taking too much out of the horses, either. They knew the wily nature of cattle-thieves in general, and that before they got through they might have a harder race than they counted on.

Yet, they found they were overhauling a single horseman, who had probably turned into the trail from the side.

Billy looked at him keenly.

"It's Turney, fur a dollar! I allers said he war in with ther gang. He's got on ter yer, an' are ridin' ter tell 'em ye'r' comin'." I knowed he war a-spyin', but I didn't ketch on afore what it war for."

"Let him tell 'em! Ther sooner they know ther sooner they'll stop, an' we'll all know where we're at."

"Yes, but it are queer we ain't seen nothin' ov ther boys from the O thet war goin' ter start when they got good an' ready. They warn't like to stay snoopin' 'round ther roadside, an' it looks ez though we orter be roundin' up on them."

"Good idear, youngster; but ef Buzz Jackson war one ov 'em it wouldn't be a wuss one ter look fur him at ther other eend ov ther herd. He's jes' blame fool ernough ter try ter head 'em off; an' ef he tries it, bercussed ef he'll come fur from doin' it."

The guess was a good one, for that was just what Buzz Jackson was trying to do; and as he was well-mounted, and had a perfect knowledge of the country, he was succeeding after a fashion that would have surprised the speaker if he had known of it.

It was thus it happened that, right before the cattle reached the spot where the thread-like track which led to Dutch John's crossed the main trail, two men shot out at the head of the great drove, and with voice and whip suddenly caused them to deflect to the right, just when Turney joined the rustlers, and by the news he brought caused them hastily to huddle for a stand.

The cowboys came on leisurely at first, but as they neared pistol range the speed increased to a whirlwind, and though the rustlers outnumbered them the advance they made to meet them was feeble, and suddenly changed to a break in their ranks, and a panic.

Without warning, the cattle, following their leaders, uncovered the rear, and with a cracking of revolvers the two men of the Double O swept back and upon them.

The cattle-thieves only knew they were being taken from the rear—that in some mysterious way the herd had been snatched from their control, and that already several of their number had felt the bite of the lead. They shot out from between the two forces, and retreated for position.

The movement was fatal to their success. Bronco Billy, swinging behind his pony like a young Comanche, saw Turney reel in his saddle from one of his well directed bullets, while Buzz Jackson marked down Jesso Jimmy for his own. A couple of cowboys were scratched more or less deeply, but they were all on hand for more, and the raid on the Double O was broken!

With over half their number more or less seriously wounded, and the cattle out of

their grip, the rustlers had not the heart to try it over, and it was only a matter of time and patience to get the herd back to the ranch.

Though the herd had been lagging for for some miles the desperate conflict in their rear seemed to have waked up their spirit, and they were already well on the way toward Dutch John's when the pursuit began. Had they been less tired it might have been a chance if they could have been gathered in hand for miles.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE ROUND-UP AT DUTCH JOHN'S.

THE stern order was a surprise all around. Ed Dale stared up at the speaker in more than doubt whether he was friend or foe, while Ione gave a little cry, as it seemed to her she recognized the voice.

Dutch John certainly did, for he threw up his hands without hesitation, exclaiming:

"Go slow mit you! I vos alway your solid friendt."

Hard Hank did not hesitate, either.

The open door was behind him, but he had no time to dodge inside. The drop was on him, and he knew the hand which held it seldom missed.

Even if it did, there were other muzzles which seemed to be staring him in the face, while from the actions of Dutch John, and the men with him, he judged that he stood alone to meet the wrath which was coming.

Yet all the same his hand flew up, and he took a snap-shot before a trigger could be pulled.

A mocking laugh came from the horseman who had uttered the challenge, and he straightened himself up on the saddle in which he had swayed just in time, while Hank went down, felled by a heavy blow from behind.

"Load him up, one of you! Tie his hands and see that you keep him till I call for him. We'll take him along. Mollie!"

The little girl ran fearlessly up to the seeming horseman.

"You are ready to go with me, are you?"

Dashing Daisy looked on in astonishment. The words seemed to fall from the mouth of Skippers—the man who had carried the child away—but it was a woman's voice that spoke.

The child held up her arms. There was more than a mystery in all this.

"That's Jack Birch you have there; bring him up!"

Birch had ceased to struggle the moment he found he was fairly in the toils. He came forward without hesitation.

"So you were in the grand plot that Hard Hank revealed to me. You were willing to pay big money if your old friend could steal away the girl at Double O, and leaving no trace of where she immediately went to, at the same time you could bring proof of who she was. A grand scheme, that! Maybe you would like to tell me what it was for?"

"You can guess," answered Birch, sullenly.

"Of course I can guess. The child inherits a fortune, if she lives. As her uncle, you might have a chance to revel in her father's wealth, if you could get your claws on her. You thought I was dead, did you? Thanks! I am very much alive!"

"And as big a demon as ever. The wonder is, Dale don't kill you!"

"Oh, he is not the worst man in the world, even if we could not entirely agree. If he had known I was a widow as well as charming, and had my child in his house, he might have been more incorrigible than ever."

"The child had better be dead than with you. I would have spared her that last curse, anyhow."

"Thank you for nothing! I will spare her that, myself, so far as it might harm her. I would leave her in the hands of Brother

Webb, but I am afraid he is not exactly the man for the occasion, when you are around, so I'll look after her myself. Never fear but what I will see that she is brought up fit to enjoy the fortune which will one day be hers, and which, I assure you, you will never handle a cent of. As for you, young ladies, I am much obliged for the interest you have taken in the affair. Your fathers are out yonder somewhere, with nothing worse the matter than a crack on the head that will be well to-morrow. When I leave, you can bring them in, and nurse them up. I had a spite at the colonel because he never properly appreciated yours truly; but you can give him the love of his late wife, and say she will not trouble him again if he keeps his distance."

"Then, you really are?" said Daisy, looking up with question in her tone.

"Your second-handed mamma that was! The dashing leader of a few cattle-thieves and desperadoes now! I am afraid the section under Jesso Jimmy has come to grief; but as they were thick as could be with Hard Hank, and he went back on me, I can't say I am sorry. I think we have scored a success on the general issue. So-long!"

Without further question or interference with the rest, Hard Hank was bundled on a horse; the queen of the rustlers carried Mollie before her, and the little troop swept away.

Jack Birch had been disarmed, and without a word he slunk away. Dutch John seemed willing to give the little party accommodations, and under orders from Ed Dale began the preparation of a substantial meal, while he and the girls went out to look for their parents.

They were not hard to find, and the reunion was complete.

To crown it all, when Stewart Webb and his daughter got back to the tavern, there had been several arrivals, and most prominent among them was Bronco Billy, who ruffled up more like a bantam than ever.

"Ef I ain't bin a-earnin' them five dollars, you say why not. Reckon I'll git yer back ter Boot Jack in ther mornin'."

Needless to say that William got his five dollars, and that Lane Mike was abundantly satisfied in regard to certain mustangs he had loaned for hire; but the Webbs did not get back to Boot Jack the following day, nor for several days thereafter.

Stewart Webb had had his eyes opened in regard to his sister before he ever started for the Double O, and his journey thither was to find out something in regard to her daughter, and to protect that daughter's rights if she was found. He had heard of her, and that Jack Birch—her dead father's brother—under the name of William Webb, was looking for her.

He and the colonel did not exactly admire one another, but they got along well enough while they were recruiting from the effects of their tribulations; and Ed Dale and Ione, assisted largely by the irrepressible Daisy, formed a mutual admiration society. When the young man and his father got together again, their little difference was healed as if by magic, and the Three Link was short a regular hand, though the colonel sent half a dozen of his own men to take his place, for temporary purposes.

When Bronco Billy left for Boot Jack, and the domicile of his much-tried mother, it was too soon for him to form a positive opinion, but as he turned away he shrugged his shoulders and remarked to himself:

"I s'pect it'll end in a weddin'."

THE END.

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